Applying for EU funding: Reminiscences of a novice

by Sarah Hills

Most people working in the field of health know that an EU grant is the Holy Grail. In a world of shrinking research resources, the EU is fundamental to a successful investigator-led project and once EU funding is obtained, the project is more likely to attract additional investment. But one thing you find when applying for EU funding is that few people actually have hands-on experience of the process. By 'hands-on' I mean organising a consortium, coordinating the writing of the proposal, preparing a budget and submitting the paperwork to Brussels.

Strategic considerations before applying

Funds from the EU are public money, and the EU is rightly concerned with ensuring this money is 'invested wisely'. This means that project leaders must ensure their project aims and objectives can be *justified* as being in the public interest and relevant to Europe from a research, social and economic point of view. This issue must be addressed immediately in the proposal and continually during the life of the project.

EU bureaucrats also claim that collaborative research including partners from many countries is more efficient than many small projects working in isolation on similar projects. Collaboration is the keyword and research should be planned to fit with pre-determined themes in order to address European societal problems.

Our experience was with a successful application at the end of the 5th Framework; the 6th Framework is now in progress and the 7th will be under way soon. Each framework lasts several years and is broken down into 'calls' with more specific thematic areas. Before the framework is made public, lobbying is carried out to ensure certain research areas e.g. mental health, cardiovascular health' are included.

The differences in each framework are mainly budgetary (there is more money) and the areas of health being funded. Since our project received funding, the amount of money allocated to projects has grown vastly. We thought our consortium was fortunate to receive a grant of around 2 million euros in 2001, but projects requesting up to 12 million euros are now being funded.

Our project is now a successful enterprise. We have a consortium of 21 partners that span Europe north to south and east to west, which has made the work a challenge but also great fun! The research being carried out is in an area with high media interest, which is helpful for attracting industry investment, raising awareness of the research, and motivating the consortium. It is worth considering that motivation does flag when work needs completing under pressure and financial reimbursement does not arrive on time from the EU.

Our first steps

Back to personal reminiscences: our experience with the application process was laborious. We made two applications, of which the first failed after a lot of work. However, this gave us an opportunity to re-evaluate both the preparation of the budget and the way the project was organised and presented. When the scientific referee report eventually arrived it was disappointing reading, but this was serendipitous as it made for a more solid application the second time, backed by collective responsibility.

We created a Project Management Board (PMB) from leaders of the scientific workpackages (the way in which the project is structured) and decided to take the advice of an EU consultant who was working in the university of one of the PMB. The PMB members were able to work together prior to consultations and spend some time considering what information was needed from the consultant. Our consultant was rather like an old-fashioned school-master (drawing on the blackboard and setting group exercises to explain certain points) – which worked excellently.

Feedback from Brussels

A sub-group of our PMB made a visit to the Research Directorate in Brussels for some feedback on our initial failed attempt. We were greeted unenthusiastically, and if we had followed the advice of the scientific officer who talked to us, we would not have resubmitted. Happily, after considering the situation later while sipping coffee in a café in the Grande Place, we decided to make a second attempt – feeling somewhat like David against Goliath, such had been the negative response. It is worth the time of any project coordinator to go to Brussels and meet some of the people in the directorate. Many of the personnel will follow the project through its lifetime, so establishing a relationship early on is helpful.

Completing the proposal documents (carried on the train from Italy to Paris and then on to Brussels and handed in personally) was a good feeling, despite last minute panic over signed contract preparation forms (CPFs) almost not arriving in time from far-flung partners. The following few months brought snippets of good news, but also additional hurdles. Each encounter required renewed discussion and reassessment, which would have been easier if we had had more information. If I had any advice for EU novices, it would be to get as much information about the entire application process, what to do at each step and how long it will take – *before you begin writing a word*. This is easier now that many projects are funded by the EU and knowledge about the application process is much more accessible by Internet.

Requests to rewrite various parts of the technical contract came at us out of the blue – with very tight deadlines, which caused some sleepless nights! You have to remember that you are preparing a contract for *real* work, *real* people and *real* implications for local budgets – easy to forget during the months of writing.

The most difficult part was completing the CPFs in so many different countries by investigators who had even less idea of how to undertake the process than I did. After several long distance telephone calls and emails the original signed forms would arrive by courier – sometimes still not correct. We were restricted in our budget and although we were told that negotiation was possible, the contract negotiation phase was over before we realised it had begun! However, there are ways to ensure that the system works to your advantage once you are under way. Although the process appears to be inflexible, budget changes can be made after approval from the scientific officer is obtained.

Once you have made the decision to apply to the EU for funding there are certain things that will help you to make life easier:

Before you start

Ensure your project theme 'fits' with the EU call. Allocate one responsible (and detail-oriented) person to coordinate the application process, collate the written workpackages, research the application process, correspond with the EU and collect the consortium documents on time.

Do some research

If possible look at proposals from other projects (obviously respecting issues of confidentiality), nothing else is quite as helpful. If you can also get hold of the evaluation and the scoring, this is even better. Our first submission was rejected and the second submission was accepted with high points – the proposal essentially being the same, but the 'presentation' was significantly improved.

Get to know the CORDIS website (www.cordis.lu). It is a mine of information, from guidelines for project management, all the financial information you will ever need, along with news of other projects. You have access to a helpdesk and specialist help with intellectual property issues (and you can sign up for an email news service).

Find a colleague who has gone through the process previously (the person who actually 'did the work') or who is responsible for running projects. They are usually working in university grants and contracts departments. Alternatively locate when and where seminars and courses on Framework 7 take place (you can also find these on the CORDIS website). If you can get things right the first time this may save a costly mistake that will haunt you for the next few years (e.g. "if only we had realised that we needed to take account of the person-months for …").

Submitting the proposal

Take into account the cost of actually preparing and submitting the proposal. Anecdotal estimates put the cost at around 10 000.00 euro (in our experience not far from reality). Do you have sufficient time and personnel *for just the application*? There is a large amount of writing and considerable correspondence and negotiation between the consortium. If you employ an EU consultant for the application, how much will that cost? Is the charge a one-off payment or will it be a percentage of some part of your grant if successful? Ask to see a curriculum of their previous applications and their success rate. Talk to other groups who have used the consultant. Remember you may need more advice during the negotiation process – if you are successful there are still several stages to undergo before you receive the funds.

A good consultant has inside knowledge of what is happening in Brussels, the type of project being funded and the level of funding you can expect. Consultants can advise you on how to write the proposal, and therefore increase the likelihood of success. However, they cannot write the proposal for you. Discuss within the consortium what level of offer your project will accept. Almost no project receives the full amount requested.

Preparing the legal documents and the budget

There are several detailed forms to be completed by each institute. Give each of your partners clear instructions about how to complete the documents and give deadlines ahead of time for when you want the forms returned. Be prepared for things to go wrong at the last minute! Ensure each investigator realises that they must ask the 'legal representative' of their university to sign the contract (this may not be the investigator him/herself).

When the scientific issues have been considered give *a lot of attention to the budget*. Find out from the EU (can be gleaned from the CORDIS website) how the budget will function through the duration of the project lifetime and make sure everyone in the consortium understands the process (this will need repeating constantly). Relate the project budget to a realistic estimate of person-months to spend on each task. Don't underestimate the time factor to attempt to make the project look good! Remember that in different countries different levels of staff take different responsibilities. Be economical but don't cut quality or safety.

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Project management

Many projects are very strong and novel scientifically, but fail miserably by not providing sufficient information on management issues:

– *Who* will be responsible for *what* and *how* will they undertake this work?
– Will management be centralised for all aspects of the work?
– *How* will meetings and other communications function (e.g. a website is essential, a newsletter is an asset), *who* will take responsibility for these?
– Indicate how you have addressed issues of collaboration and cohesion of the consortium.
– In the Gantt chart include personnel training, preparation of documents, ethics committee submissions – allocate time generously – then double it!
– Make liberal use of Gantt and Pert charts and organigrammes.
– Keep the list of Milestones and Deliverables short and simple; the same for the Workpackages
– Remember to justify every aspect of the project.

Ethics

If the project requires human or animal experimentation a separate and detailed review will be carried out by the EU, if the project passes the first stage. Check beforehand that your project complies in every way with European and national ethical guidelines.

The proposal document

Be prepared to justify the science, the management and the social and economic value of the project.

– Keep the text simple and straight to the point, attractive and consistent.
– Make liberal use of bullet points and other indicators for emphasis.

Remember: the reviewers have limited time to assess your project against many others.

Collaboration

Finally, try to find partners with whom you can work – a shared motivation is important. You will need to obtain a CV from each partner to ensure they can carry out the work in the time allocated and that they have the personnel with specialist knowledge. Are your partners good communicators? Do they make good use of email and respond to your email communications promptly? This is a taste of things to come when managing the network.

And if you fail …? Try again – don't waste your time and experience!

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A further article 'Grant writing: Satisfying all the criteria by Ian Metcalfe' will be published in the September issue.

Writing Chinese names

Chinese names consist of the family name followed by the first name. The family name is written first because roots are important to the Chinese. Family names say many things about one's ancestral and cultural roots. In early migrant societies, many clan associations were established based on family names, dialect groups and common geographical areas. These clan associations assist new migrants to integrate into the society of the foreign land in which they have come to seek a better life outside of China.

In China, the written form of Chinese has been 'romanised' and is called 'han yu pin yin'. However, among migrant Chinese, Chinese names are pronounced as they would be in Chinese, depending on the dialect group they come from and many 'romanised' versions exist. Hence, a few written forms exist for one family name. For example, the romanised family name, 'Lin' in China, also takes the written form of 'Lim', 'Lam' or 'Lum' among migrant Chinese. Other examples are as follows:

Cai - Chai, Choi, Chua, Tsai
Chen - Tan, Chan
Huang - Ng, Wong
Li - Lee
Liu - Lau, and the list goes on

Chinese first names usually consist of one or two characters. For example, in Lee Peng, Lee is the family name and Peng is his first name. In Lee Peng Hui, Peng Hui is his first name.

For Chinese who adopt an English name (religion is one of the many reasons for doing so), there are various ways of writing it. For example, Benjamin Lau Shun Tung can also be written Lau Shun Tung, Benjamin or Benjamin Lau. Rarer are two-character family names like Ou-yang (Ouyang or Auyong), Si-tu (Situ or Seetoh). Examples of names would be Ouyang Fen Qiang or Situ Ying.

Unfortunately for Western audiences no 'standardisation' is applicable for writing Chinese names. There may be instances where Chinese names are written with the first name as hyphenated words, for example, Peng-Hui Lee or Lee Peng-Hui. If Chinese names are written the Chinese way, that is, family name followed by first name, an English name may be added before the family name or after the first name. Confused?

I would be happy to clear up any confusions you may have about Chinese names.

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