

HOW TO PREPARE GOOD AND COMPETITIVE ACADEMIC PROJECT APPLICATIONS

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This paper is devoted to the important points how to prepare successful academic institutional projects. Also, it depicts several common mistakes and flaws in project applications and how to avoid them.

ҚАНДАЙ ҚИЛИБ МУВАФФАҚИЯТЛИ ВА РАҚОБАТБАРДОШ АКАДЕМИК ЛОЙИХА ТАЙЁРЛАШ МУМКИН

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Мазкур мақола муваффақиятли академик лойиҳа тайёрлашга оид бир неча муҳим тамойилларни ёритишга қаратилган. Бундан ташқари, унда лойиҳа талабномаларида учрайдиган кенг тарқалган хатоликлар ва камчиликлар ҳамда уларнинг олдини олиш бўйича таклифлар ёритилган.

КАК ПОДГОТОВИТЬ ХОРОШИЙ И КОНКУРЕНТОСПОСОБНЫЙ ПРОЕКТ

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Эта статья посвящена наиболее важным пунктам в подготовке успешных академических институциональных проектов. Кроме того, в ней описаны несколько наиболее распространенных ошибок и недостатков в проектных заявках и приведены несколько советов по их устранению.

In every year, there are many wide ranges of academic programs and foundations announcing new calls for project proposals. For instance, national educational and research projects of Uzbekistan that are announced by the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, or EU funded programs such as Erasmus+ (used to be TEMPUS and Erasmus Mundus) or H2020, DAAD scholarships from Germany, or JICA scholarships from Japan, CRDF (National Science Foundation) projects from the USA, Asian Development Bank projects and many more. Winning a project from any of these programs or foundations requires investing substantial amount of effort and time to prepare competitive project proposals.

There are many sources of information and methodologies how to write project proposals and some of them are given in [1 -6]. To prepare project proposals there are a few common steps that can be summed up in the followings:

1. To Have a **project idea or ideas**
2. To Find **open call or calls** for proposals
3. **To Study call's thematic areas and requirements**
4. **To Build project consortium**
5. **To Write project application**
6. **To Submit prepared project application**

7. **To Wait** and hope for good.

Project idea. Let's assume that you have got a bright project idea or ideas to address certain issues that are necessary to solve today. Having a great project idea is not sufficient to make a good proposal. There are a few other things to be fulfilled along with your project ideas. For instance, you would need to clarify how your project idea or ideas will address the specific issues which have some important values of today in one or several fields. With your project ideas you need to answer a few general questions of why, how come, who and what, e.g. why this project proposal must be funded; What problems and needs of today are addressed and solved with implementation of your project's ideas; Who are the project's target groups or end users; What are the needs of target groups that your project will address; How your project ideas are different from other similar or analogous projects, on-going and supported by other sources; How your project ideas are aligned or in-line with which specific government programs or policies where beneficiary institutions are located; Who are/will be the stake-holders during implementation of your project.

To Locate Open Calls. There are many hundreds of calls for proposals in every month that can be found from internet sources. Most of new calls for proposals are announced on-line first and then via other media sources. Thus, using internet sources wisely and efficiently is most advised. Once you find the call that is utterly cohesive with your project ideas, then you can start working on technical issues and requirements of your found call. If your found call's thematic areas and technical requirements are not perfect match with your ideas, then you should adjust your proposals ideas to the requirements of the call or search for other sources for open calls for proposals that will match with your project ideas.

Very often it is the case that many people would do the above two steps other way around. First they search for open calls for proposals because either they know what specific programs would correspond with their project ideas or they already have gotten a good experience on specific programs and their project applications. Thus, in general they tend to generate the project ideas according those program calls for proposals and not from the scratch. This is the case with professionals who are very experienced in writing specific type of projects under specific programs.

To Study Call's Thematic Areas and Requirements. This step is also very vital in order to prepare a successful project proposal. You need to study all technical details of the call very carefully; for instance, what are the thematic areas, who or what institutions are eligible to apply for, what activities are supported by the call program, what technical requirements in the project application, project budget and project activity tables, what supporting documentations are required, what is the deadline for submission of proposals, and such questions. Once you have completed your studies with your found call details and technical requirements, then the next major and heavy step comes that is project writing. If you are applying for institutional project, you would need to work on building a project consortium before starting to work your project application.

To Build Project Consortium. Only if your project proposal is an institutional application, establishing strong project consortium is not only one of key requirements of programs but also a key to success in preparing a competitive proposal and its successful implementation afterwards. This process in general starts with a partner search that can be carried out using existing links and contacts, and in parallel using internet web-resources and partner search options provided by national contact points or representative offices of the program that you are applying to. In fact, this process need to be started as soon as you have developed your project ideas and prepared a logically structured short resume or narrative of your project proposal with specific project objectives, project background (needs analysis and problem description), expected outcomes and roles of partners.

To Write Project Application. This step is always most effort and time consuming step in project preparation. This procedure very much depends on the project application forms and questions. Besides, during this stage it is advised to have many discussions and brain-storming sessions to discuss project ideas, objectives, methodology and roles of project partners (if the project isn't individual proposal) carefully. In general, it contains the following points: project title, project background (needs analysis, current status quo, existing analogous actions and projects in line with your proposal), project narrative (specific project objectives, project methodology – how you are going to achieve your project objectives, how you are going to measure your project outcomes, viz. indicators of progress, quality control and monitoring, etc), project work-plan of activities and role sharing, project management and coordination (or also, conflict resolution issues as well sometimes), project visibility/sustainability (any project idea has to be not only implemented but also sustained after the project funding is over) and the project budget table (what financial resources are required to complete all planned activities and tasks) and co-financing (what project items are funded by other sources such as from beneficiary parties or other projects or personal contributions with extra workloads). This procedure in general takes longest time due to its complexity and lengthy steps/procedures to follow exactly as defined in the call application forms. There are some beliefs that any project application can be written by a group of experts or academics from various departments. However, in general practice most successful project applications as a whole complete narrative are written by one expert or professional who is not only knowledgeable in project application areas but also understands program guidelines and rules very well.

Once the project application forms are completely filled in accordingly, it is strongly recommended to review and edit all files of a project application by a person (who is fluent in application language) or by several people who didn't participate in discussions and proposal preparation stages. This helps to locate any unclear or vague points of your proposal and correct any mistakes in application contexts. Subsequently, to check and verify completeness of all required documentations is necessary before submission of a prepared project application.

To Submit Project Application. To follow call deadlines is as much vital as preparation of project proposal and if you can't manage to complete your proposal by

the date (day, hour, minute or even seconds) of application submission via on-line submission tools, you have just missed your plane of success. Your completely finished application with some minor (minutes or seconds) delay is alike having purchased a flight ticket but not being able to reach to your departure gate before the gate is closed. Thus, in all steps of application preparation, time concept and meeting time deadlines are utmost vital.

To Wait and Hope for Good. If you have managed to submit all your complete application with all required files on-time, then only thing remains that is just to wait with a good hope until results of selection will be announced. It is worth mentioning that many calls are highly competitive and losing in the first call does not mean that your application is worthless for funding. You can always work on your application, improve it and resubmit it in the following year again that is in practice with many project proposals.

All of these above depicted steps are quite generalized procedures that we have to follow. Now, we take specific examples how these procedures are applied in reality while preparing institutional project applications as outlined. A few years ago, we – Tashkent Automobile Road Institute have prepared an academic institutional project in new engineering curriculum development [7]. How did we start working on development of our project ideas? First, we have had an idea of preparing new engineering curricula focused on computer applications and modeling in master's degree for mechanical engineers. We already had good understanding of what were the challenges, difficulties and needs for computer applications and modeling for engineering problem solving from university and industry perspectives. Also, we analyzed all current aspects of computer modeling issues backed by the government decrees and higher education reforms. In addition, we knew that our idea of developing new engineering curricula would fit within the EC TEMPUS program calls for Joint European Projects in curricular reform issues. So, we have gotten in our basket first two issues (items) ready to move ahead with project application preparation for that we have studied carefully all guidelines and rules of the call from the EC TEMPUS program from the internet sources and available other sources as well. By this way we have prepared our project proposal ideas in a more structured manner by specifying our specific project objectives and end outcomes, project target groups, stake-holders and local project partners. This procedure itself was really fun and interesting to collect ideas and discuss with colleagues interested in our project proposal. We have gathered lots of nice ideas and even some very ambitious ones. Note that project ideas must be realistic not too ambitious and not too “shallow”. When we started moving to the next stage of writing the project proposal, then we filtered out our project objectives and left only realistic and solid ones. We have had only four specific objectives in our proposal:

1. To Develop a new master's program in computer applications and modeling;
2. To Establish computer modeling laboratories;
3. To Prepare a new generation of engineers;
4. To Establish university-industry links.

Project consortium building is specific and necessary for institutional projects. Our project was an institutional project and thus, we had to establish the project consortium according to the rules of the program of EC TEMPUS. We have taken European partners from our several existing links there. We were in fact lucky and fortunate in this regard. We contacted them and informed about our intentions and plans, and our project objectives. Luckily, we have gotten a positive reply from their side willing to work with us. De facto, finding appropriate partners for institutional projects is not easy and quick at all. We have had another case with an interesting and very competitive project proposal in mechatronics [8] that we could not submit for five years due to lack of appropriate European partners. Working with project proposals is alike any other dedicated work that requires lots of persistence and perseverance. It's required and strongly advised to start this process of partner search as early as possible and recommended to use all available links or existing personal contacts from other projects. It is worth noting that most of institutional projects are based on a bottom-up approach principle that means all initiatives should come out on a personal or peer-to-peer level and afterwards come up to departmental and so forth higher and wider scales.

In most of the cases, many applicants overestimate their possibilities and put aside a partner search process till very last month of application submission that leads to failure of proposal submission subsequently. In a partner search, internet resources such as websites, and social and professional networks, such as, www.linkedin.com can be handy options to locate suitable partners. Once you find appropriate partners from Europe if your project is an EU funded project, start discussing all imperative issues of your project proposal at the first hand. In your discussions, it is strongly advised that you be explicit with your expectations from your partners, in particular, partners from abroad, and don't assume that they know what you are expecting and what you are capable of doing for your project proposal preparation and implementation after winning it. Also, it is recommended to discuss with your counter-parts all project budget, administration and management issues in a very open manner and not to leave any ambiguous points in project management and administration if you are going to work with new partners. Again, on importance of explicit discussions with partners a "good" example can be taken from our "bad" experience. A year ago one of our good project proposals with strong project consortium was chosen for funding, but unfortunately we could not implement it due to problems with the project coordinator/grant-holder from European side, who didn't understand and want to take into consideration specifics of our rules and regulations. As a result, our selected project for funding was cancelled due to our mistakenly chosen project grant-holder from European side. Thus, not only transparency of information put into the project application but also having broad and open discussions on technical and country specific issues with project partners and collecting feedback from all sources are utmost important for a success of your proposal and its implementation after winning it. It is also salient to obtain written approval of partners stating their willingness to participate in your project application. There are a few cases when at first agreed partners have rejected at the

last point when it was time to submit a project application with approval letters from them. Because of such failures, a few project applications could not be submitted. It is often quite time consuming, tedious or even frustrating to locate appropriate project partners from abroad in particular.

When you and your colleagues have completed a whole process of project proposal narrative of specific project objectives, expected outcomes, partners and specified roles/responsibilities of partners, it is time to start writing your project application. A golden rule is never overestimate available time resources of yours or your colleagues to write down your project application. In general or in rough estimate, one month time for project application writing for one skilled/expert could be reasonable.

There are a number of rules and steps to follow in preparing a good and competitive project application. 1. Clearly defined real/viable specific objectives to have. 2. Good relevant analyses of needs, challenges, in-line on-going actions/reforms relevant to your project objectives at beneficiary partner institution's/institutions' land/country. 3. Project methodology - is how you and your project partners are going to achieve the project goals. How indicators of progress or deliverables are measured and assessed. How and what quality control measures are applied to attain envisaged project outcomes. What specific roles and responsibilities are allocated for each project partner. What resources, that can be specialists, academic or research materials or methodologies developed already, laboratory hardware and software tools, and so forth, are available or can be taken from other sources. What risks and pre-assumptions are taken on board. Since one can't predict or foresee many relevant aspects in any partner institution or country in the future that may put the project into jeopardy of failure. 4. Project visibility and sustainability. There are many programs that require having good visibility and sustainability of project outcomes after project funding is over. Many standard and conventional procedures can be employed for any project visibility. But the project sustainability cannot be always attained with standard or conventional procedures only and require considerable hard work and systematic approach with feasible plans. For instance, if your project is about developing language training for school teachers, sustainability of your project outcomes can be how to keep circulating, updating and continuously improving your project developed training courses, how to keep and make your project established lab or training center keep running and flourishing after project validity period, how to keep or motivate trainers trained within your project and so forth. 5. Calculations of project budget and financial resources. A simple answer to this point is using "a rule of thumb" or reasonably good estimation of resources, such as, staff costs, travel, equipment (if hardware is allowed) and printing/publishing costs, and some indirect or administrative costs. In most programs, there are well detailed rules, explanations and guidelines about eligible and ineligible costs for a project that must be respected exactly as stated. Note that it is not a wish list of yours or your partners but only necessary and allowable resources in order to achieve your project objectives. It is advised to get approval from all partners with final version of project budget and its allocation

among partners. 6. Collect all supporting official documentations and files. 7. Submit all files online first and then send originals/hard copies via ordinary mail if required so. 8. Wait and hope for good.

These above described steps are general and common steps and rules valid for many programs and there may be also some differences for some small extent. Let's consider now a few most common mistakes and flaws that applicants make in preparing project applications. They are put in the order of importance and logical consecutiveness:

1. Project objectives are too vague or way too ambitious and thus, project narrative and envisaged outcomes and deliverables are too ambiguous or unrealistic or too grand. This sort of project applications will always get lowest scores. Thus, be concise and be realistic in defining your project objectives and foreseen outcomes and tangible/intangible deliverables. At the same time, your project objectives and outcomes should not be too shallow either.

2. Many project applications succeed in defining specific project objectives but fail in analysis of needs and problems why this project is needed to address certain problems and needs of target groups. De facto, project background description is a hook for evaluating experts' attention to make them like your project application and award high scores. Thus, make your analyses and facts very vivid so evaluators could easily grasp your ideas of what you are trying to achieve within your project and why this application need to be selected for funding. Remember that clarity is power.

3. There are many project applications which succeed with project objectives and background narrative explanations with good arguments and facts relevant to a project as a whole but they fail in depicting or developing a project methodology that defines how you are going to achieve your project objectives. Above a few questions are listed above but not limited with them only. An applicant can find out many specific recommendations and questions how to define and describe his project methodology on program guidelines. Also, to make the project methodology strong an applicant can or should take some advice from experts in project writing or read on-line resources again. There are thousands of resources. Most common errors or flaws in project methodology are depicting tasks inadequately clear or not being able to make set of tasks or works logically inter-linked with time constraints and reasonably allocated resources, and so forth.

4. Also, there are many applications that fail in defining roles and responsibilities of project partners. Applicants collect a large number of institutions in order to make an impression that they have established a large project consortium without any reasonable explanations on a simple question of why partner A or B or C is chosen for the project and what is the role and contribution of partner A or B or C or D, etc.

5. Project visibility and sustainability. Most project applications depict many standard and well known procedures to ensure project visibility

and dissemination of project outcomes, but fail, using what specific means and measures how those procedures are performed. Besides, almost all projects fail to provide a reasonably good plan of works ensuring to achieve sustainable continuation of project outcomes in the long run after project funding is over. That is why more than 90% of institutional academic projects literally die after project funding is stopped. However, it is in the interest of beneficiary institutions to continue and sustain project achieved results by using different creative measures.

6. Budget allocation and defining resources necessary to achieve project objectives are also very often problematic points in proposals. Either project applicants don't know or study carefully eligible costs for the program or they sometimes put inflated budgets for staff costs and hardware costs in most cases. They fail distribute their project budget among the project partners fairly according to allocated tasks. On the contrary, in practice many project applicants and their partners spend huge amount of time on budget details by discussing and computing every detail precisely; however, it is not worth that much effort and time. It is advised to follow general rules and guidelines of the program to make a project budget and get approval from all partners. Instead of spending so much time and effort on budget details, it is appropriate to work more on improving other items, such as project objectives, needs analysis, project methodology, project consortium and project sustainability, in project application. The reason for that is no matter how precisely you have defined your project budget if your application is chosen for funding, you will need to revise all budget headings due to changes in prices of travel costs, equipment, printing and other costs, and so forth. The point here is to put more emphasis and work on most important points at first and come back to minor details later if there is any time left.

7. There are many project applications which fail not just because they have poorly defined objectives or badly developed methodology approach but because of poorly written (poor language) application and too much information and confusion of given information about partners and allocated tasks to them. Also, note that the more or longer information is not the better instead clear, precise and concise description is necessary. If you have difficulty with the language of the application, ask somebody to write or check for errors to make your proposal error free and more understandable for a person who has no idea neither about you nor your project proposal. Never presume that something is obvious, only information put into your application is assessed not pre-assumptions. Use plain language and avoid too technical or too scientific terms so an expert/evaluator, who has no expertise in your proposal areas, should be able to understand your application.

These are most common flaws in academic institutional projects. It is worth mentioning that writing a good project application is a very complex issue that requires in general approximately two month long period. First one month need to be allocated for development of project ideas, preparation of project analysis narrative,

project consortium building and other relevant issues. And a second month has to be allocated only for application writing. This two month period is general figure that can be shorter or longer depending on your project complexity and consortium size, and availability of an experienced person - capable of writing a good application, and readiness of salient components at your hand. One of the most recommendations for people who are going to write a project application is to start working on their project ideas as early as possible and never overestimate available resources and options; because there are many different things which may influence directly in your project application preparation. Also, it is advised to make a project preparation work-plan at the beginning with precise time deadlines for each step of proposal writing.

One last concluding remark that can be made with a whole project application preparation is that there is no “perfect” project proposal due to complexity of application procedures and requirements in general but that does not mean one can’t prepare a good application. To write a good application with minor flaws and many strong points, one should know or be able to sort out which points are most vital and which ones are more imperative and which ones are less significant to make one’s proposal strong and get higher scores in evaluation processes.

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