Horizon Europe: ERC, MSCA & Cluster Topics;
Enhancing your chances of success

This document summarises generic tips shared by our EU National Contact Points or those who are recent recipients of European Commission awards.

Be Strategic

- **What does your funder want to fund?** – The European Commission's strategic priorities are set out in the Horizon Europe Work Programme documents relevant to each allocation made through the different funding schemes, these can be found here. As a prospective applicant, you are advised to read the Work Programme relevant to the call you will apply to in order that you appropriately 'pitch' your project. In addition to the overarching Work Programme, which sets out the strategic aim of the funding allocation, the call topic or guide for applicants documents should also be read in full as this will discern the specific focus and content of your application. Information sessions are routinely arranged by the National Contact Points to convey important information relevant to upcoming calls and the provide support to applicants. In addition, the EU BDOs issue 'Writing Guides' to help applicants to the Marie Curie's Postdoctoral Fellowship and Doctoral Network schemes;
- **Attend information sessions –** National Contact Points will routinely schedule events to promote their funding schemes, as well as brokerage events to help partners find each other. In addition, the EU BDOs will host their own evens to provide support and advice on institutional procedures;
- **Identify partners early -** to make sure your ideas align and that you are collectively able to respond to the call as it is described. With the exception of ERC, the vast majority of Horizon Europe calls are collaborative requiring at least 3 EU Member States of Associated Countries to be represented in the partnership. Partner search facilities can be useful, but not as much as making the most of your own international networks/contacts.

Take time to get your ideas right

- **Engage colleagues as 'critical friends' in discussing plans early** – doing this before you start to write can help ensure research questions are framed appropriately, the right methods will be applied and you are working with the most appropriate collaborators –
it will be difficult to address fundamental issues in these areas once an
application has been drafted.

Familiarise yourself with the Participant's Portal

- All applications and grants are administered through the European Commission's Funding and Tender portal, seek support from your EU BDO if you are using the site for the first time which you need a registered account to use.

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- **If you're not ready to submit – _don't!_** - waiting until the next deadline may improve your chances of success and avoid being penalised against resubmission. At recent *Funder Insights* seminars, a large proportion of successful UoA awardees indicated they had pulled earlier planned submissions of their bids (in some cases just ahead of the deadline) in order to address weaknesses in their proposal – they felt the grant would not have been funded otherwise;
- **EU applicants should have secured domestic funding –** due to the highly competitive nature of the schemes, and the inclusion of a 'Funding ID' for some schemes where you will need to demonstrate a track record of securing funds, you are not advised to apply to Europe without having first secured funds from UK sources. You are also not advised to take on the Coordinator's role without having spent time on EU projects as a beneficiary;
- **Consult with your collaborative network on all critical decisions** – as they will have been heavily involved in the writing of the grant application and may have commitments to secure funds, it is vital to maintain consistent and open communications with your team.

The European Commission will only fund the highest quality applications
- **Any flaws in your approach will be spotted** – all EC proposals must be underpinned by scientific excellence and an innovative approach that will have significant impact – this is essential for success and you should follow the advice of your EU BDO and peer reviewers to improve your application's quality;
- **Do not include any partners who are not making a valued contribution to the project** – there are no benefits to having partners involved simply due to their location or sector, this will be considered a weakness to have a partner whose role is not fully explained or whose value is uncertain;
- **Be ambitious and innovative** – a confident proposal will be bold whilst also practical, addressing risk mitigation and facilitated by a realistic timescale and justifiable resources.

Make the most of internal support
- **Realise the value of rigorous Peer Review** – seek out reviewers who will be tough and honest (including those with past experience of your scheme) – this is how the expert evaluators, selected by the European Commission will approach reviewing your bid;
- **Apply for Pump Prime Funds** – if you incur costs to recruit a grant writer, either as coordinator or beneficiary, or to free up your time to write the application, you may apply to the University's Pump-Prime Research funds;
- **Give R&I time to read your final application** – there is a considerable support available to UoA staff planning to apply so give plenty of time to utilise this support - you may also need time to respond to any issues that are identified.

Read the guidance
- **Read the current guidance documents** – this includes the funding guide and any supplementary documents for specific calls. You need to make sure you understand what the call is seeking and if you can match the expectations;
- **Follow the funder's application template, use the section headings and apply the correct style guidance -** ensure font size, line spacing and margins are as specified by the funder. Do not exceed word counts, page lengths etc, otherwise, your application may be ineligible for evaluation.

Who am I writing for?
- **Expert Evaluators** – your application will be assessed by those with skills aligned to the Keywords you use in your Part A. Take into account that evaluators will have to review a large number of proposals and may not have a detailed knowledge of your particular area of research;
- **Leave nothing to chance, explain everything** – anything you don't explain will be considered as an omission and you will lose valuable points. Unless you explain your approach, methodology, team roles, tasks and deliverables, risks, outputs and impacts, the Expert Evaluators will take this lack of details as a lack of commitment.

Help your reviewers - make your application easy to read!
- **Convey the novelty of the research, your expertise and enthusiasm and the imperative to fund -** try and do this in the opening paragraph of the Part B document;
- **Use a schematic to explain your Work Packages –** this can demonstrate the interoperability of the various components of research that will happen in tandem with each other;
- **Use plain English** - if the inclusion of acronyms or technical terminology is needed explain the terms in full;
- **Follow the template structure –** consult with your BDO if you are unsure about the content required for each section and definitions that apply, e.g. the difference between a milestone and a deliverable;
- **Respond to each section according to the questions asked –** all applications are assessed against the evaluation criteria; Excellence, Impact & Implementation. Ensure that the content you provide under each section is truly relevant to the scope of these criteria;
- **Check content AND presentation** – spelling, grammar and punctuation are important, if your coordinator is not a native English speaker, volunteer to proof read the application before submission;
- **Consider the balance between sections** – as your score is derived from 50% Excellence, 30% Impact and 20% Implementation, be sure to provide sufficient space and content to each section.

Don't get disheartened
- **Unfortunately, excellent proposals don't always get funded** – The European Commission's success rates can vary from 8-20% depending upon the scheme and the number of competitive proposal submitted. Don't give up, take on board the feedback you receive and consider consulting with senior staff and R&I to help plan how to take your research ideas forward. Remember to check resubmission rules if you plan to do so;
- **Consult your Evaluation Summary Report to understand why your grant was successful/unsuccessful** – this document is shared with you by the Commission along with their funding decision and should be used to understand what the Peer Reviewers liked and disliked about your proposal to avoid making similar errors in future.

Appendix School and Grants Academy support available to colleagues planning a submission to Horizon Europe:

- **Senior staff support -** the Institute Directors, Research Leads, Head of School, School Directors of Research and Programme Leads are always happy to speak to colleagues at any stage to discuss their research ideas and application plans.
- **Setting aside defined grant writing time -** writing a high-quality grant proposal takes a substantial stretch of interruption-free time, always at a premium in any University working day! Consider looking at your teaching calendar across the year, identifying potential 1-2 month gaps free of teaching responsibility, and reserving that time for grant planning and writing. Explore whether you can create such a gap with the help of colleagues and course organisers, who may be willing to re-distribute your marking, or isolated lectures, allowing you to focus on the grant.
- **Intention to Submit (ITS)** – this is mandatory for Marie Curie and European Research Council (ERC) application and it is best pursued 3-4 months ahead of deadline. Please contact your EU Business Development Officer and follow your Institute/School process to arrange this.
- **UKRO Membership** – the University is a member of the [UK Research Office](#) who are our National Contact point, based in Brussels and a valued source of information and guidance for Horizon Europe proposals and projects. They have an variety of information sessions throughout the year and you can register for news and events via your University of Aberdeen e-mail account.
- **Grant Review Meeting** – can usually be arranged on request with the National Contact Point for your scheme, with sufficient notice, either ahead of a submission (to enable a near finalised application to be discussed) or following an unsuccessful bid (to help plan strategy for moving forward with the planned research).
- **Peer review** – peer reviewers will be identified at ITS panel, if you are applying as part of an EU Collaboration, internal peer review is not mandatory. However, you are encouraged to seek as many views as possible on your proposal to help you prepare a competitive bid.
- **Interview preparation** – should you apply to the ERC and be invited to a panel interview as part of your evaluation, the Grants Academy can arrange for a mock panel to be convened to pose questions and provide constructive feedback on responses.
- **Fellowships** – should follow Fellowship Support Process – please contact the Grants Academy.
- **Library of funded grants** – held by the Grants Academy and can be shared with colleagues on request. NB – Horizon Europe was launched in 2021, so our library largely consists of Horizon 2020 examples which tend to have different templates and application requirements.
- **Register as an EU Expert Evaluator** – notify the Grants Academy if you have registered and the panels you get invited to evaluate for. This is also done via the Participant's Portal.
- **Impact -** the Impact and Knowledge Exchange team can review draft proposals to help develop impact plans, enhance prominence of impact and develop public engagement plans.
- **Data Management Plan (DMP)** – the Grants Academy and the Digital Research team can help advise on DMPs.
- **Ethics** – although most applications do not require formal ethics approval at pre-award stage, any issues or approval requests should be discussed with the School Ethics Officer (Research Governance Team for SMMSN staff undertaking clinical studies) prior to submission.