TN1302: BESTPRAC

Best Practice IN PROJECT PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

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This document is aimed at assisting participants in H2020 EU-funded projects, in particular TN 1302: BESTPRAC participants, to identify issues that may arise before or during the Action. This document is provided for information purposes only. Neither the author(s) of this document or any BESTPRAC WG1 Administration member contributing to the preparation of this document sharing their knowledge, experience or best practices in project planning and implementation can be held responsible for the use made of this document.

Introduction

The purpose of this manual is to provide an overview of identified good practices in project management and administration and to assist project administrators in preventing or resolving possible dilemmas related to the project planning and implementation. This manual is a result of COST Action *TN1302-The voice of research administrators - building a network of administrative excellence (BESTPRAC)* supported short term scientific mission "Sharing the best practices – identifying the weaknesses in project cycle management" hosted at the Centre for Social Innovation, Vienna, Austria. The manual is open for update and additional contributions of research administrators involved in the COST BESTPRAC.

Planning Stage

Researchers

Be proactive. Sitting and waiting will not attract external funding. In order to build your future consortium, go to meetings, attend conferences, organise seminars and invite scientists you want to get in touch with. Informal meetings are the best to get to know people and make acquaintances among specialists whom you want to see in your consortium. Create your own network, stay in touch. They will be your potential project partners. Personal contacts with them help avoid communication failures during the upcoming project.

Know your goals: before you decide you want to submit your proposal in this or another call, sit down and plan a little bit. Be precise about determining your scientific goals – planning how to achieve them is in fact a project. Plan your resources, tasks, risks, milestones and describe the results of your actions. Does your project require the cooperation of other scientists? Think who they could be – they are your potential partners. If you know what you want to achieve and how are you going to do that, you will easily put it in words and fit into the project application template.

Get help. No one expects a scientist to know everything about the international funding, administration, organisational and legal aspects or budgeting. Among administrative staff in your university are people who can help you to plan the project, apply for funding and to manage the project. They want you to be successful and they will offer you their support. A good research project support office is a real treasure to a researcher and to the institution, use their expertise early.

Proposal preparation

Coordinator

The differences between the Framework Programme 7 (FP7) and HORIZON 2020 (H2020) are not large. Nevertheless, in the project planning phase follow the new guidelines for H2020 but draw from your (or other institution's) previous experiences in FP7. It is important to answer all sub-questions in each section/subsection of the application template (download all documents for H2020 from H2020 Manual and Participant Portal or Reference Documents). Once you/your institution have/has set up a draft concept of the project and identified potential partners, organise a preparatory meeting to get a joint understanding of efforts but don't rely solely on the meeting.

Ensure that your partners understand the rules of programme.

There are two possible approaches in project planning: 1) centralized approach where the project coordinator prepares everything and 2) engaging the Work Package(s) (WP) leaders to develop WPs.

If you are a coordinator, divide work packages into tasks and establish inter-linkages between activities/tasks and financial management. Additionally, for each WP, request from partners to set up deliverables so that they would feel responsible and have a sense of ownership for their tasks in the implementation phase. It should be clear to all partners what they need to do and which deliverables to take care of.

Prepare templates for information you want to be provided by partners to make sure they don't miss anything and do it in a similar way.

Make a good division of roles and ensure that there are different persons for different roles (especially if the project is of a large scale). Essential roles include: the financial manager who does all work related to finances and replies to financial questions and issues; the coordinator; the scientific manager etc. For the project coordinator team it is important that the division of roles is such that one or two persons from the team have an overview of the content and who should/can contribute; and one person from the team should have an overview of both content and budget. Consult partners for budget distribution and planned efforts. When writing, write in present tense (The project contributes to, the project aims to … etc.) instead of future tense (The project will contribute to, the project will aim to …) so that afterwards, in case of changes it is easier to communicate the changes to the Project Officer along with amendments (if any) – for example, activity takes place in month 13 and then it actually happens in month 15.

Risk management is always necessary. Assess possible risks when writing the project proposal and plan a risk management policy. If you have a high probability of risk and high impact you should look at it carefully and monitor and take action to mitigate the risks. Plan some ways of good documentation for your project, plan updates of deliverables (follow up on what happened after and update the deliverable with new info).

Level of demand is increasing, especially regarding the impact – for both communication and impact (exploitation of results – which can sometimes be a problem for social sciences if there is no tangible result or if there is no innovation – investing effort in thinking of what is the "product" of your efforts/project). Thus, a concept should be presented on how the impact will be achieved, how you plan to measure the impact etc. For impact measurement, it is good to try to follow up on the people who benefited from the project (e.g. success stories, example of WBC-INCO.NET published success stories), write/make a video or interview as impact stories. Having an impact assessment as a tool for measuring impact: results/findings/outputs is useful. Be aware that you might have difficulty identifying the actual impact because much happens only after the project ends (unless you plan to do some follow-up in future). Be sure to prepare and gather the feedback forms from your events.

Researcher

In case you decide to act as a partner (not as a coordinator), then choose your coordinators wisely and check their previous experience, if possible find out if the past projects implemented by this organisation were successful etc. The same advice stands for selection of project partners if your institution is project coordinator. Identifying the right partners is important, but in policy driven actions (mostly CSA) you cannot ensure 100% that each partner will do what they are supposed to. Unfortunately, sometimes you have to include even non-performing partners because they are gatekeepers (desirable either because of the country of origin, having important persons/researchers employed, representing important policy and decision making body in a certain country). In that sense, it is important who the partner you cooperate with is and that you weigh, in those cases where the persons working on the project is not able to deliver results and implement activities as planned (or you had previously negative experience with that person from particular institution), if the institution is really important to have as a partner although you are aware that it might fail to perform.

Project implementation

Communication

Internal communication with partners is extremely important. Have a virtual project meeting/video conference discussing the progress per each work package e.g. every 3 months up to 2 hours duration. This is to keep all partners updated on project progress (and upcoming issues, if any). This can be good for motivating partners instead of just sending emails.

Additionally, stick to the planned topics during the meetings (be demanding if some partners have a lot to say – sometimes off the topic) and take minutes from every meeting and distribute in the consortium. It is also good to discuss the tasks regularly with the partners involved in this task (e.g. regular short Skype meetings) to see if there are problems and to develop solutions.

You have to find solutions for different communication cultures - for example find a telephone person for communication with partners having a weak email communication. Write shorter emails with couple of sentences and straight to the point to avoid any misunderstanding (especially if you have partners with weak English skills).

When using Email, be concise. A good practise is to write the first sentence as a summary of the e-mail to make clear what is the purpose of the message and then describe the details in the text later.

Be aware of the social component in team-building, social events that can motivate active participation to build, trust/confidence in your partners plays a great role.

Always have a 'plan B' for everything including the communication with partners.

Create a general office address for every project (office@projectsite.xyz) which redirects to the addresses of each office-team member at the coordinator organisation. Each partner should make sure that persons from its team are on the redirection list from general team@... or all@... mail. But do not rely on email communication only - discuss important things via phone or face-to-face / Skype.

Activities and Deliverables

If another institution/partner is WP leader and the project coordinator wants to be involved to make sure that everything is being done as planned (monitor the progress) then the project coordinator can request from WP leader to be in CC of the correspondence related to that WP. It is good to have some additional activities in mind that were not initially planned in a project and be ready, in cases when money is not spent on a particular activity (either the partner did not perform well or force majeure was in place), that you can use the unspent money and reallocate it for additional activities: Be sure that deliverables are met, and other activities are approved by the Desk Officer. It also helps to develop the budget per activity (for example, a detailed budget for particular workshops with costs related to accommodation, travel, per diem, meals, coffee breaks, materials etc.) - detailed planning is always good for project management and it is part of the support to micromanagement.

In some cases, in particular in the (Social Sciences and Humanities) SSH, external reviewers/experts could review important deliverables (books, reports) and send their comments for improvements. It is good to have at least one reviewer who is a native English speaker who can then do the proofreading as well (as part of the reviewing process) by which you have lower costs for proofreading. In this way, you ensure better quality of the important deliverables.

For books and reports, a Concept Note, is important to clarify the content before the partner starts the task (what is expected output, what the partner should do), 2-3 pages even if it is not reviewed by external experts. Have your partner, who is in charge of the particular task, develop the concept and submit the pre-final version for commenting, to you as a project coordinator and other partners who deal with that work package, in order to achieve the sense of ownership and responsibility with the partner. Before organizing a workshop, develop a concept with the aim, rationale of the workshop, who should/will attend it. Sometimes mistakes are made in investing too much effort in bringing higher numbers of people than bringing the relevant ones (no matter how small the number in the end is).

Monitoring, impact and evaluation

Monitoring WP leaders can be done by the partners and follow-up meetings and through development of concept notes for books and reports (explained earlier) at the beginning of the task. Partner budget sheets are also good as a monitoring tool. If there are changes that can have impact on the budget it is good if you have one person who is at least half of his/her time spent for this project dedicated to financial issues and management and can do micromanagement to mitigate the risks. Avoid micromanagement: Clear decisions and good practices is the best motivator.

Complete an interim report to know where the overall project budget implementation stands six (6) months before the project closes. In case of underspending or overspending, adjust the budget as necessary and dedicate/invest the underspend to increase the impact. For example, if some money is left from other activities, then invest it into the already planned event to boost its success – it may provide travel costs reimbursements to get more people to come or similar).

Handling changes

Changes in the team: develop a project handbook (with lists of contacts, templates), handbook on visual identity (logos, templates) and a communication plan. Communicate this to all partners and in particular new people in the project. Make sure that all new people subscribe to the project mailing lists. Put all deliverables, reports, minutes from meetings into the internal part of the project website to make it easier for new staff to find out what has been done and agreed.

Differences from what was planned to what can be implemented:

- Even if you want to make some minor changes consult with the Project Officer.
- Remember that some changes require amendment to the Grant Agreement (GA).

Reporting

Establishing internal/interim reporting deadlines is recommended. Internal reporting can be scheduled for every 6 or 9 months depending on the scale of project, partners etc. Additional project management tools can assist in preparing the financial reports as well as monitoring the progress in budget spending and activities. Internal monitoring and reporting on a regular basis in large projects can facilitate the periodic reporting to the commission.

Remind partners that the timely submission and approval of the Form C is necessary to receive reimbursement. Partners outside the Eurozone should use actual exchange rates on the day of the payment.

For the coordinator of the project, the communication, reminding and support of the partners is important. You should remind your partners to do their tasks as planned and at the same time support them, help them with advice on project management issues in order to reach common understanding of what needs to be done and how this can be achieved and jointly solve problems, e.g. by sending reminders that reporting deadline date is approaching.

If a partner is WP leader, then the project coordinator should not get too much involved in his/her work unless it is a new initiative of the project coordinator and s/he takes care that the specific tasks get done.

Dissemination & Outreach

Dissemination should be well thought through depending on the different stakeholders and target groups, expected impact etc. Define your target group(s) clearly to select the right tools for outreach activities. Seek advice from your public relations department in planning the outreach strategy for a project. Use routes already established at your institution for outreach activities (e.g. Science Cafes, Days of Open Doors) to achieve optimal impact and do not re-invent.

It is difficult to measure the impact of dissemination activities. Ensure at the beginning that appropriate statistics are available for your website and social media channels. But statistics show just a small part of the potential impact. Statistics plus event participation lists is mainly how the impact of dissemination activities can be measured. Evaluation is used more for the web page usability (user-friendliness). Having a questionnaire as a tool for measuring impact at the end of the deliverable (for example, a book) asking if it was useful and what could have been done better is useful.

The following list presents possible dissemination approaches, tools and methods that worked out in implemented projects:

Good idea is to set up a YouTube/video/vimeo/… channel (or if your organisation already has one use that one) and to upload videos and slides with photos and some intro text from events organised.

If there are similar projects funded through the same programme, then it is good to establish synergies with those projects and, for example, share the information on projects on different projects websites or similar.

The website also has a role for monitoring purposes, i.e. putting the activities/projects updates on the website provides a continuous insight into the progress in project implementation. "News" material from the website can also be used in a project newsletter.

Try to generate more interest by promoting projects through Facebook (FB) and Twitter campaigns (plus press releases and newsletters)

It pays to advertise the project (or results) back-to-back with the European Commission events or websites: Use your Communication departments, their expertise and established tools and formats.

Depending on the project, different communication forms can be used, such as flyers, brochures, Interactive map etc: The driver should always be the target group.

Try to find groups of your project's interest on Facebook and Twitter and be active in those channels where you find your target groups – try to attract their interest and get them to your/your project's page.

It is good if you already have a starting point from a previous project, meaning connections with targeted audience and if you are already recognised by the audience because of that previous project.

Example: launching a competition by invitation only for researchers to film a short video on their research project and before a Science, Technology and Innovation day publish it on the web/FB to be voted for (videos are working out better than posters).

Strong dissemination in terms of personal presentation – wherever you go talk about the project and adjust the message to the person you speak to (depending on whether it is a researcher, policy maker, businessperson etc.).

Knowing the language of the region you work with can be an advantage for dissemination.

Make sure that both communication and web page maintenance are led by one partner (if one is doing the communication and another web page maintenance – it does not work – loss of information, miscommunication etc.).

Remember about Open Access rule and also plan budget for that.