

What makes a good proposal?

Feedback from UK participants in Health Research in FP6

The Framework Programme is the current EU programme of support for collaborative R&D in organisations, both public and private, of all sizes. Framework Programme 6 covered 2002-2006, Framework Programme 7 will cover the period 2007 to 2013, with a budget of approximately 50 billion Euros, aiming to strengthen science and technology in Europe and encourage international competitiveness.

One of the principal scientific areas supported in FP6 was Life Sciences, Genomics and Biotechnology for Health. The research programmes begun under this theme will be continued in FP7 as the Cooperation Programme for Health. These collections of views on what makes a good proposal were derived from practitioners with a range of perspectives, companies, large and small, project evaluators, project coordinators, UK National Contact Point and the European Commission's DG Research.

This summary may help those now considering their own involvement in FP7

In judging the resources required and potential value that could accrue from a successful project, it is helpful for prospective applicants to address some broad questions: What innovation is conceived? What are the possible benefits – for project partners and the EU? What is the European added value?

What makes a good proposal?

Among the points discussed as important for proposal success were:

- Building on a proven track record of research excellence, a developed research community, and a history of achieving Framework Programme objectives.
- Addressing excellent science in a topical area.
- Demonstrating that a strong European presence already exists in the target area but that there are also new opportunities to strengthen through collaboration and integration.
- Ensuring that the project has (a) a first rate co-ordinator with both scientific reputation and proven organisational skills and (b) good project management processes (including support for integration of participants and dissemination of outputs).
- Ensuring that all evaluation criteria are addressed. For example: covering the required topic in its entirety; scientific excellence – focussed, innovative approaches, clear description of complementary work packages and scientific plan, targets and deliverables.
- Providing a balanced and integrated consortium covering key players in EU research and also involving younger investigators.
- Aiming to deliver value for money with realistic requested budget.
- Involvement of SMEs and also larger companies is highly valuable and may be mandatory in certain topics.

Making the consortium work

Conducting a successful Framework project is not, of course, merely a matter of defining a good proposal. Successful project management and communication throughout the project lifecycle is crucial. Success during the project will draw on the same strengths manifested in preparing a successful proposal:

- Capitalising on previous track record as a research community – developing partnership and shared vision.
- Creating and sustaining an active role for strong scientific management team and administration team and empowering younger participants.
- In managing the internal and external links, the consortium needs procedures for ensuring (a) secure facilities for discussion between project members and the exchange of results, reagents, tools and techniques, (b) recognition by other scientists for exchange of information, (c) some communication with the wider community to explain purpose and progress of the project.
- Organising regular meetings for each work package (and clusters of work packages) for developing goals, reviewing progress and interaction with other work packages, raising training opportunities, exchanging skills and expertise.
- Scheduling collective meetings (probably annual/bi-annual) for broader reviewing of goals and facilitating interaction between project participants and additional, open, meetings with the wider scientific community to present on progress, engage with external experts and review by advisory committees.
- Ensuing involvement of European Commission in this network of meetings.

What is the Coordinators view of a successful project?

Project coordination requires a major commitment of time and energy, necessitating a supportive local administration and diplomatic as well as scientific skills.

- Coordinators must be prepared to take ownership and make hard decisions on redeployment of funds, settling disputes and maintaining momentum.
- Significant responsibilities include: (a) overall management of project, (b) acting as intermediary between consortium and European Commission, (c) financial administration, (d) ensuring milestones and objectives are reached, (e) overseeing promotion of gender equality and science and society issues within the project.
- Significant relationships include: (a) European Commission as source of funding and as customer for project deliverables, (b) Project Manager for project monitoring and execution, (c) Scientific Committee for advisory and evaluation roles, (d) Commercial Committee (where appropriate) for advisory, translational and exploitation roles. Depending on the project, the different roles represented by external stakeholder bodies might be combined into a single Advisory Board.

The European Commission anticipates that life sciences and biotechnology will contribute to a considerable degree to the Lisbon objective of Europe becoming the most competitive knowledge based economy in the world by 2010.

The Health research theme in FP7 emphasises the importance of innovation and the integration of SMEs and other companies, in order to reach the Lisbon goal by ensuring that new knowledge is disseminated and translated into new therapies and clinical practice.