

Lessons from H2020 evaluation in social sciences and humanities

INTA MIERIŢA

Experience

I am a sociologist from Latvia.

I have evaluated proposals as an EC expert from 2015, incl.

H2020 SC6 (Europe in a Changing World) - Migration, Governance, Transformations

H2020 MSCA ITN

H2020 MSCA RISE

H2020 MSCA IF

Successful project applications prepared:

H2020 (Cultural Heritage and Identities of Europe's Future, chaired by Aston University)

EEA / NFI grant “Education Management in Rural Depopulation: A Comparison between Norway and Latvia”

ESF Human Resources Development Project

A lot of experience in international comparative research, including on topics connected to environmental attitudes and green behaviour

What differentiates successful proposals?

NO flaws! As soon as there is something - the slightest shortcoming - the mark goes down, but the competition is so tough that sometimes without 5-5-5 the proposal will not be funded

No ambiguity remains (the most common criticism is that something is 'not clear enough')

Graphical schemes used for illustration (eg management structure, theoretical framework);

Tables can be used to show the link, eg between research questions and WP, in which they will be answered; research questions and methodology and data, disciplines and competences of specific people, etc.)

Shows very clearly how **the questions of the call will be answered**. It is not mandatory to tackle all the challenges of the research call, but the more, and the better the connection with the task and the better the prospects.

Convincingly argues the **project's contribution, applicability, impact and sustainability** even outside the narrow call of the project (excellence, ambition!)

Excellence

The **novelty** of the research in the context of previous research and literature is clearly demonstrated.

It must be shown that the authors are well-versed and experts in the topic to be applied, referring to the latest findings, unclear issues and current debates.

Great care must be taken with the wording of the **research goals**; as accurately as possible, with tasks.

Gender - it is not enough just to mention that it will be taken into account. Describe exactly how – not just in the composition of the team, but also analytically.

Interdisciplinarity - to make sure that it is reflected in methodology, theories, approach - not only formally, for example, in the different profile of partners.

Methodology - should not be too general. It must be clear what and how exactly will be done and why.

Original and **imaginative methodology** is becoming more common: experiments, data mining from the Web, innovative methods of content analysis and structuring evidence, spatial IT methods, visual data collection methods, etc.

Acknowledging and making use of **all kinds of data** (e.g., satellite data, cell phone data, Web cookies, linking different administrative data).

Participatory approach

Community-based **participatory research** is becoming increasingly popular which essentially places the community at the center of everything.

All stakeholders must be **involved as much as possible in all aspects of the research process**, not just at the end as static subjects of communication.

By doing so we can make sure that what we do is relevant to people, addresses problems of real importance. It can lead to innovation. We can also predict and avoid possible problems with the uptake of the new technologies and solutions, and improve the efficiency of communication and implementation.

Participatory research incorporates research, reflection, and action, often via successive rounds of consultation and engagement with the community.

Stakeholders can be involved in: problem identification, polishing research questions, data collection, analysis and interpretation, as well as communication, allowing the target groups to speak for themselves about what they think is important in the language that they understand.

Just some examples:....

Impact

Clearly **define the target groups** and exactly how they will be reached (if relevant, don't forget the EU level too!). Don't forget society! Ideally, the aim of disseminating information to each group.

Various **innovative forms of communication** are appearing more and more often, including video blogs, social media, public forums, exhibitions, etc.

A higher **level of detail** indicates a more thoughtful design of the project (eg approximate journals or conferences already targeted).

Don't promise too much! Whether there will be 5 publications or 50, evaluation will not be significantly affected, but rather may cast doubt on feasibility. Of course, there shouldn't be too few outputs as well, because ambition is important.

Remember the **sustainability** of the results, eg by mentioning what will happen to the data after the end of the project, how the research of the topic will be continued, joint projects for the future developed.

Implementation

Almost all H2020 applications have an **Advisory Board**, which brings together the field's most knowledgeable experts from different countries. Preferably involves NGOs, industry, etc. – depending on the topic.

Almost all applications aim to develop a **Communication and dissemination plan** (sometimes also a **Risk management plan**).

It is important to clearly demonstrate that the institutions have the **necessary resources** to implement the project. It is not enough to be a 'large, well-known and prestigious university', it is necessary to describe what kind of administrative, financial planning, etc. support is provided for the project at the university level, what is their experience in the implementation of such projects.

It is a myth that it is crucial that applicants have many high-level publications. The most important thing is to demonstrate **experience and knowledge** in a specific field (projects, publications).

Some are concerned about possible discrimination against institutions from the UK. We are specifically instructed to treat them the same as any other institution from eligible countries, and I have not observed any biases.

Where possible (and logically necessary), it is recommended that NGOs and private companies be involved in the consortium.

Each partner must have a **clear and logical role**, and the distribution of tasks must be balanced.

'Dissemination and communication' and 'Management' are usually separate WPs that run **from the first to the last month** of the project!

Typical mistakes

Confused, unclear description of the research, insufficiently explained basic concepts

There is no or almost no review of the literature, so there is no clear contribution to the existing knowledge

Unconvincing methodology that affects credibility is a huge disadvantage

Large imbalance in the workload of consortium members (person months), which is not sufficiently justified

No risks identified (assumed to be absent or minor)

Discrepancies between the results described in WP and elsewhere in the text

Mixed communication with dissemination. Vaguely defined target groups and strategy for reaching them

Too simplistic, unconvincing management structure and procedures

A few more suggestions

In H2020 projects, it is not so important how large the consortium is, but it is desirable to cover different European regions as much as possible (of course, this also depends on the topic of the application).

Of course, it is desirable to involve prestigious, well-known European universities as much as possible - this undoubtedly makes the application more convincing.

The text **MUST** be reviewed by an English language editor! The language of almost all proposals is impeccable.

Give the text to as many people as possible to have a critical look, in order to avoid a situation when something is still not clear to an outside reader.

You are responsible for making the necessary information easy for the expert to find. Experts tend to be lazy, so it is ideal if you indicate the exact phrases in the text yourself, eg what makes the project innovative, how exactly is it interdisciplinary, etc., even if this information can be "found" in one way or another in the text.

To conclude....

The quality of applications and competition vary greatly from one call to another. In a situation where 2% of applications are approved, of course the chances are very slim even for a great application. However, do not give up - often the application can be processed and submitted elsewhere.

Research shows that those researchers who receive a good grant evaluation yet do not receive funding but still try again, end up producing more outstanding publications than those who receive funding in the first attempt.

Good luck!

New research confirms the value of an old proverb

IN 1968 ROBERT MERTON, a sociologist at Columbia University, identified a feature of academic life that he called the Matthew effect. The most talented scientists, he observed, tend to have access to the most resources and the best opportunities, and receive a disproportionate amount of credit for their work, thus amplifying their already enhanced reputations and careers. Less brilliant ones, meanwhile, are often left scrambling for money and recognition. Or, as St Matthew puts it (Chapter 13, verse 12), "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath."

The Matthew effect is undoubtedly real. But a more recent piece of research, by Yang Wang, Benjamin Jones and Dashun Wang of Northwestern University, in Illinois, suggests Matthew's verse is not the only relevant aphorism. Another, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again", also seems to be true.

The Drs Wang (who are unrelated) and Dr Jones discovered this by collecting data on grant applications. In particular they examined those submitted between 1990 and 2005 to America's National Institutes of Health (NIH) by junior-level scientists. Rather than analyse every proposal, they focused on two groups of applicants: those who received relatively high scores on their submissions but just missed getting a grant, and those who scored similarly well but just succeeded in being awarded one.

The three researchers found that, rather

than automatically holding the failures back, as the Matthew effect might be thought to predict, an early-career setback of this sort was sometimes associated with greater academic success in the long run. Those in the sample who missed out on funding were more likely to drop out altogether from the NIH system than those who won it. That came as no surprise. What did surprise was that those in the near-miss group who persevered and continued to apply for grants after their initial failure outperformed their counterparts who had succeeded first time, as measured by the number of citations of their research that they received over the subsequent ten years. On average, they garnered, over that period, 36% more citations and published 39% more "hit" papers (those with citations in the top 5%) than their near-win counterparts.

True grit

While some of this can be explained by the weakest scientists in the no-grant group giving up, something else is going on as well. The three researchers showed this by removing the lowest-performing scientists from the group that had won grants until its dropout rate matched that of the group that had not. That done, they found that there was still a significant gap between the subsequent performances of the two groups. They thus conclude that other, unobservable, characteristics are at work—the sort of stuff that laymen refer to as "effort" or "grit". ■

Thank you!
