



NCC-DE

GERMANY CYBERSECURITY
COORDINATION CENTRE



Report on Ideas Paper and Proposal Check

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1 Executive Summary

This report contains advice on how applicants can improve the quality of their applications. Important information in this report is based on an analysis of evaluation summary reports (ESRs) for the calls HORIZON-CL3-2021-CS-01 and HORIZON-CL3-2022-CS-01-01, from which several recommendations have been derived. The document also contains summaries of important elements of the application processes in the “Horizon Europe” and “Digital Europe” Programmes. At the end of the document, a template for idea paper and proposal checks is provided that applicants can use to obtain expert feedback from the NCC-DE.

2 Introduction

2.1 Description

The following report provides advice and recommendations on how to improve project applications, in order to increase applicants’ chance of success. The report also summarises important elements of the application process and the application documents and provides a template for idea paper and proposal checks. This template can be used by applicants to outline project ideas and receive expert feedback from the NCC-DE.

2.2 Report on collected experiences

To increase the chances of success, below you can find information and recommendations for improving project applications.

Methodology:

For an understanding of the most frequently cited shortcomings of successfully submitted proposals, the DLR of the NCC-DE consortium analysed Evaluation Summary Reports (ESRs). ESRs were thereby analysed for:

- In 2021, ESRs for the call HORIZON-CL3-2021-CS-01, deadline 21 October 2021, have been analysed. We analysed ESRs for proposals that received at least 10 points, and received at least 3 points per criterion. Overall, 105 ESRs were analysed.
- In 2022, ESRs have been analysed for the call HORIZON-CL3-2022-CS-01-01, deadline 16 November 2022. We analysed ESRs for proposals that received at least 10 points, and received at least 3 points per criterion. Overall, 39 ESRs were analysed.

We semi-automatically analysed these proposals, identified 489 points of criticism within them, categorized and evaluated them, and derived our recommendations from this analysis.

We would like to point out that this analysis is based on “Horizon Europe” calls. The ESRs for the “Digital Europe” project applications were not available to NCC-DE at the time of writing. However, when applying for a “Digital Europe” project, the following recommendations can also be very useful.

In the ESRs, a range of specific criticisms were made of the proposals. Here, we list the most common ones.

2.2.1 Main findings

The most common criticisms across all criteria:

- At least some of the KPIs are insufficiently clear, insufficiently quantifiable, or not suitable for measuring the success of the objectives.
- The methodology has not been convincingly argued for, and it has not been convincingly argued that will lead to the achievement of the objectives.
- The exploitation of results after the project's conclusion, as well as the target groups or target markets, are not clearly described.
- There are problems with the tasks, deliverables, milestones and work packages. Often, their interrelations are unclear (e.g. the mapping of tasks to deliverables, or the relations between different tasks). Sometimes, milestones do not always have clear sets of deliverables as means for verification.

The most common criticisms under the "Excellence" criterion are:

- The objectives and/or use cases are not described in enough detail, and sometimes distinctions between them are not clear enough.
- The methodology has not been convincingly argued for, and it has not been convincingly argued that will lead to the achievement of the objectives.
- It is unclear how the proposal relates to the current state of science/technology ("state of the art") and to what extent it goes beyond this.

The most common criticisms under the "Impact" criterion are:

- At least some of the KPIs are insufficiently clear, insufficiently quantifiable, or not suitable for measuring the success of the objectives.
- The exploitation of results after the project's conclusion, as well as the target groups or target markets, are not clearly described.
- Important risks have not been sufficiently discussed, and contingency and mitigation measures have not been detailed.

The most common criticisms under the "Quality and efficiency of the implementation" criterion are:

- There are problems with the tasks, deliverables, milestones and work packages. Often, their interrelations are unclear (e.g. the mapping of tasks to deliverables, or the relations between different tasks). Sometimes, milestones do not always have clear sets of deliverables as means for verification.
- Important risks have not been sufficiently discussed, and contingency and mitigation measures have not been detailed.
- There are problems with the consortium. The allocation of tasks within the consortium is unclear or unbalanced. The consortium partners seem to lack relevant expertise.

2.2.2 Recommendations for proposal preparation:

Considering the experience gained by DLR as NCP (National Contact Point) and analysing the reviewers' comments in the "Evaluation Summary Reports" (ESRs), we would like to give you the following recommendations:

- **Read and understand:** Read the work programmes and the relevant application document carefully.

- **Comply with specifications:** Ensure that the proposal fully complies with the formal specifications of the work programme and call.
- **Coherence:** It is important that all parts of the proposal cohere and don't contradict one another.
- **State of the art and complementarity:** The state of the art should be well-researched and clearly described. It should be clearly stated how the work will go beyond the state of the art. The project's complementarity with ongoing research projects should also be described.
- **Objectives:** Ensure that the stated objectives of the project are both ambitious and realistic and meet the requirements of the work programme. It is important to ensure that the description of the objectives is not too general, and that the objectives and their significance are described in some detail. Clear pathways towards achieving the objectives should be described. The different objectives should be clearly distinguished one from another.
- **Methodology:** The methodology needs to be realistic. It is important to explain in sufficient detail how the methodology will support the successful execution of each targeted objective.
- **Use cases:** It is essential to ensure that the description of the use cases is not too general. Important is a clear connection between the technologies developed and the use cases.
- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** Define measurable, verifiable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to track the progress of the project and objectively evaluate the results. The KPIs should be described in considerable detail.
- **Tasks, work packages, deliverables, milestones:** The tasks and the deliverables need to be clearly described with enough specificity. The connections between the tasks and the deliverables need to be made clear. The work packages (WPs) need to be conceptually distinct and resource allocation across work packages needs to be justified. Milestones need to be clearly defined.
- **Exploitation:** It is crucial to articulate a clear exploitation strategy that outlines how the project outcomes will be utilized beyond the life of the project. This should include plans for commercialization, knowledge dissemination, and societal impact. Describe potential markets, stakeholders, and how the project aligns with broader industry or societal needs. Detailing a pathway for how innovations will reach end-users or contribute to policy development can strengthen the proposal.
- **Risk management:** Fully consider the risks and hurdles (management, consortium, third parties, users, project structure) that may arise during the project and develop clear measures to proactively overcome these challenges. Any risk mitigation and contingency measures that are identified should be sufficiently detailed and clear.
- **Consortium:** Ensure that the consortium is balanced and that the involvement of each partner organisation is convincingly justified. Clearly outline the distribution of tasks and roles within the consortium. It is necessary that the consortium members have relevant expertise.
- **Expertise:** Related to the previous point. The consortium partners need to have sufficient expertise on all aspects of the project, including technical, legal and ethical questions, as well as expertise relevant to the use cases.
- **Timetable:** Carefully review the timetable for the planned reports, milestones, work packages and tasks. Ensure that the timetable is logical and realistic. Both timelines that are insufficient, and excessively ambitious can be problematic.
- **Resources:** Review the allocation of resources (human, material, travel) and ensure that they are appropriate to the planned tasks and activities. Ensure that there is a clear match between resources and tasks.
- **Legal issues, ethical and social issues, and data protection:** Proposals must thoroughly address legal, ethical, and social considerations relevant to the project's scope. This includes compliance

with national and international regulations, ethical standards in research, and the protection of personal data (in alignment with GDPR, if applicable). Ethical and social issues must be identified and addressed in some detail. Proactively identifying and addressing these issues demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the project's broader context and responsibilities.

Get feedback: Have the draft reviewed by a third party. Contact the NCC-DE or the National Contact Points (NCPs) for cybersecurity in "Horizon Europe" and "Digital Europe" at an early stage.

2.3 Assistance

2.3.1 How to identify a suitable call

The European Commission's Funding & Tenders Portal¹ is the central information point for participation in EU funding programmes and calls for proposals. There you will find comprehensive information on all announcements, especially in the context of "Horizon Europe" and "Digital Europe". Applications can only be submitted via this portal.

Tip: The NCC-DE will be happy to help you identify potential calls for your project idea!

2.3.2 Application preparation - First documents

Below you will find information on documents that, based on our advisory experience, suitable for giving you a first overview of important information. They will provide you with important information on the call for proposals, the application procedure and the evaluation criteria. These documents play a crucial role in the whole application process. We recommend that you read them carefully in order to develop a basic understanding of the requirements of the call. The documents explain not only the procedures for submitting applications, but also the criteria according to which the submitted projects will be evaluated. These documents provide a first insight into the structure and procedure of the call, allow early planning and increase the chances of successful participation.

Tip: Always use the latest version of the respective documents! If you have any uncertainties or questions, please get in touch with our contact persons at the NCC-DE².

2.3.3 Work Programme

The respective work programmes for "Horizon Europe" and "Digital Europe" contain detailed information, e.g. on the general objectives, the intended results and the services to be provided in the calls for proposals. The work programmes provide a comprehensive description of the planned measures and describe, among other things, the funding earmarked for the implementation of the respective projects.

2.3.4 "Call-fiche" or "Call Document"

In addition to the work programme, the "Call Document" is part of the calls for proposals within the framework of "Digital Europe". The "Call Document" contains the relevant information on the respective calls. The respective "Call Document" is available on the Funding & Tenders Portal as soon as a call is open.

¹<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-search>

² <https://nkcs.bund.de/en/kontakt>

2.3.5 “Proposal Template” and “Application Form”

The "Proposal Template" in “Horizon Europe” and the "Application Form" in “Digital Europe” are the elementary documents that are used for the description and submission of project applications. The "Proposal Template" / "Application Form" represents the application that is submitted to the Commission.

Both documents consist of two parts:

Part A is generated by the IT system and is based on the information that participants enter via the submission system in the Funding & Tenders Portal.

Part B is the narrative part in which the project is described. This part consists of three sections, each corresponding to an evaluation criterion. Part B must be uploaded as a PDF document, which must correspond to the templates downloaded by applicants in the submission system for the specific call or topic.

Proposal structure

The structure of the application differs depending on the type of measure and the Framework Programme addressed, such as "Horizon Europe" or "Digital Europe".

The following presentation corresponds to the structure of a full proposal in "Horizon Europe" and "Digital Europe" Programmes.

“Horizon Europe” / “Application Form”	“Digital Europe” / “Application Form”
Part A	Part A
1. General Information	1. General Information
2. Participants	2. Participants
3. Budget for the proposal	3. Budget
4. Ethics and Security	4. Other questions
5. Other questions	
Part B (max. 45 pages)	Part B (max. 70 pages)
1. Excellence	1. Relevance
2. Impact	2. Implementation
3. Implementation	3. Impact
ANNEXES	4. Work-Plan
	5. Other
	6. Declarations

Figure 1: Application formats for “Horizon Europe” and “Digital Europe” Programmes

Information on the chapters of the “Proposal Template” in “Horizon Europe”

Part A:

The “Horizon Europe” “Proposal Template” is clearly structured. It is oriented towards the evaluation criteria of excellence, impact and implementation. All structural and formal requirements must be

strictly adhered to. Form A, which must be completed online, provides the European Commission with some basic information about the project, the consortium and the planned budget.

Below are some notes on each chapter. For detailed and legally binding information, please refer to the official documents.

Part A is divided into five sections.

1. General Information

The first section, "General Information", provides basic information about the proposed project. A meaningful title and a catchy acronym, together with the brief description in the abstract, serve as the project's calling card. In addition, the project is categorized, which will later influence the selection of suitable reviewers. Precise wording is therefore crucial. Applicants should also indicate the duration of the project, depending on its complexity. Particular care should be taken when writing the abstract, as it is often the first thing reviewers read and therefore influences their first impression. With a maximum of 2,000 characters, there is limited space to describe the project and highlight any special features. It is important to remember that the abstract is published and can be found even years after the project has ended.

2. Participants

The second section, 'Participants', presents all the key information on the project participants. This includes all relevant information about the participating organizations, such as the PIC (Participant Identification Code). A detailed list of the staff working on the project is an integral part of this section and is used to verify the operational capacity of the whole consortium, a basic requirement for eligibility. The consortium as a whole must demonstrate its ability to carry out the project in accordance with the defined objectives. To this end, references to previous projects, publications, developments, products, and applications will be requested. Each participating organization is also required to explain its role in the project and to list the scientific staff known at the time of application. Information on an 'equal opportunities plan', as an eligibility criterion for Public bodies, must also be provided before the grant agreement signature

3. Budget for the proposal

A detailed description of the Estimated expenditure for the project and its distribution among the partners in the consortium must be provided in chapter 3 "budget for the proposal". Standard budget categories are (A) "Personnel costs", (B) "Subcontracting costs", (C) "Purchase costs", (D) "Other cost categories" and (E) "Indirect costs". "Indirect costs" (overheads) in "Horizon Europe" will be reimbursed at a flat-rate of 25% of the eligible direct costs (categories A-D), excluding e.g. "subcontracting costs".

4. Ethics/ Security

This section requires a detailed examination of any ethical issues and security concerns associated with the project. Applicants must assess potential ethical implications, including privacy, data protection, environmental impact, and the use of human subjects or animals in research. A comprehensive ethics self-assessment should be conducted to identify any ethical issues and describe how these will be addressed. It should be explained what will be done to ensure that the activities are compliant with EU and national ethical requirements. including obtaining necessary ethics approvals. Similarly, security issues related to data, research activities, and outcomes must be evaluated and described in

the security self-assessment. Applicants should outline measures to ensure data security, protect sensitive information, and comply with relevant EU regulations.

5. Other Questions

A range of other questions is addressed here. For two-stage calls, if there are substantial differences compared to the stage-1 proposal, those have to be listed, and reasons have to be given. For calls that involve clinical trials, studies, or investigations, essential information about these needs to be provided.

Part B (max. 45 pages) is divided into 3 sections.

1. Excellence

The “Excellence” section is where applicants must articulate the groundbreaking nature of their project. It begins with a clear statement of objectives, laying out both the overall goals and the specific, measurable outcomes that are expected. This section demands a thorough justification of the project's relevance to the “Horizon Europe” program, emphasizing the novelty of the concept and how it advances the state of the art. The methodology proposed for achieving the objectives is laid out here. Potential risks need to be identified, and mitigation strategies need to be described.

2. Impact

The “Impact” section requires applicants to forecast the project's potential effects. This involves detailing the expected outcomes and how they align with the “Horizon Europe” program's broader objectives, with the relevant destination, and with the relevant topic. Furthermore, the wider effects on society, the economy, and the scientific community must be discussed. Applicants must describe their strategy for communication, dissemination, and exploitation of results, ensuring that the project's benefits reach the appropriate stakeholders and the wider public. Potential barriers need to be identified, as well as approaches for how to overcome them.

3. Implementation

In the “Implementation” section, applicants outline the practical steps to ensure the project's success. This covers the work plan, divided into work packages, milestones, and deliverables, providing a clear timeline and an allocation of tasks among consortium members. The section evaluates the consortium's capacity to carry out the project, detailing the management structures and procedures, risk management strategies, and contingency plans. Budgetary considerations are addressed, with a transparent presentation of the financial plan, including the allocation of resources among tasks and partners. The implementation section reassures reviewers of the project's feasibility by outlining how the project's technical, financial, and administrative aspects will be managed.

ANNEXES

The annexes serve as an opportunity to present any additional evidence that is important for the application. The most common forms of annexes relate to information about clinical trials, information about financial support to third parties, information on important security aspects, and extensive ethical discussions that go beyond the ethical self-assessment in part A.

Information on the chapters of the “Application Form” in “Digital Europe”

Part A is divided into 4 sections:

1. General Information

This section lays the foundation for the project proposal under the “Digital Europe” Programme. The project's title, acronym, and abstract are given here. A title and memorable acronym act as the project's identifier, while the abstract must succinctly capture the essence, objectives, and expected outcomes of the project. The duration of the project should be clearly stated, reflecting its scope and complexity. Given the abstract's role in making a strong first impression and its future accessibility, crafting it with precision to effectively communicate the project's value is essential. The consortium partners also make declarations regarding their eligibility, commitment, and compliance with the programme's rules and regulations in this section.

2. Participants

In the “Participants” section, detailed information regarding each project partner is presented, focusing on the organizational background, country, and the specific role each will play in the project. It is explained what each entity's contributions to the project objectives are. Key information includes the Participant Identification Code (PIC) for every organization involved, ensuring the consortium's configuration is transparent and aligned with the project's needs. Details about the participating organizations and the relevant departments are listed.

3. Budget

The “Budget” section contains a presentation of the project's financial blueprint, detailing the allocation of funds across various activities and consortium members. Among other things, the requested grant amount, personnel costs, in-kind contributions, and income generated by the project are listed. This section reflects the project's financial feasibility and the consortium's financial management capabilities.

4. Other Questions

This chapter “4. Other questions” corresponds to section “4. Ethics/Safety” of the “Proposal Template” in “Horizon Europe”. It also addresses ethical and safety issues related to the project. Applicants must assess potential ethical implications, including privacy, data protection, environmental impact, and the use of human subjects or animals in research. A comprehensive ethics self-assessment should be conducted to identify any ethical issues and describe how these will be addressed. It should be explained what will be done to ensure that the activities are compliant with EU and national ethical requirements, including obtaining necessary ethics approvals. Similarly, security issues related to data, research activities, and outcomes must be evaluated and described in the security self-assessment. Applicants should outline measures to ensure data security, protect sensitive information, and comply with relevant EU regulations.

Part B (max. 70 pages) is divided into 6 sections.

1. Relevance

The “Relevance” section demonstrates how the project aligns with the objectives of the specific call, and also with the objectives and priorities of the “Digital Europe” Programme. Depending on the requirements of the specific call, the project should also demonstrate its impact on the supply chain

for digital and technological products in the EU or its ability to overcome financial barriers, such as the lack of funding to address market obstacles.

2. Implementation

In the “Implementation” section, the focus shifts to the practicalities of project execution. First, the maturity of the project should be explained, i.e. the state of preparation and the readiness to start the implementation of the activities. Then, the section discusses the logical arrangement of work packages and their contribution towards achieving the project's goals. Topics that should be discussed in this section include resource allocation within the consortium, finances, management processes, and connections between the project and previous works or EU-funded initiatives. A comprehensive project management strategy, including quality assurance, monitoring, evaluation methods, and risk management strategies, should be detailed.

3. Impact

In this section, the project's effects on its target sectors and beyond are described. Strategies for maximizing the project's reach, including dissemination and exploitation plans, are detailed here. The expected outcomes should be linked to broader societal benefits, and the discussion of environmental sustainability is crucial here.

4. Work-Plan

The “Work Plan” section of the “Digital Europe” proposal outlines the framework and detailed activities for project execution. It's structured around work packages, which are substantial divisions of the project, each with a specific objective and associated activities, milestones, and deliverables. There should be a minimum of two work packages for most projects: One work package for management and coordination tasks, and additional work packages for specific project activities. If the project involves financial support to third parties, conditions and criteria for this support must be described within the relevant work package. Each work package should list its objectives, planned tasks, milestones, and deliverables.

5. Other

Section “5. Other” pertains to the ethical and safety issues outlined in Part A. This section encompasses a description of the ethical and safety issue(s) as detailed in Part A, along with the measures taken to address and prevent these issue(s).

6. Declarations

The “Declarations” section serves as a formal acknowledgment regarding the funding aspects of the project, specifically addressing the issue of double funding within the EU framework. It includes a declaration that, to the consortium's best knowledge, the project, either in full or in parts, has not and will not receive duplicate funding from any EU sources, including but not limited to EU-managed funds by Member States or other entities such as Regional or Agricultural Funds. Should there be instances where the project has received or is considered for other EU grants, detailed explanations and justifications are required. Additionally, if the project involves financial support to third parties exceeding the call document's specified threshold, a rationale must be provided to justify the necessity of higher amounts for achieving the project's goals.

Note: Only the “Proposal Template” / “Application Form” provided in the submission portal must be used.

2.4 Idea paper and proposal check

The NCC-DE offers you the opportunity to carefully review your idea papers, outlines and full proposals before submitting them to the EU Commission's Participant Portal. The aim of the NCC-DE is to show you the potential for improvement.

We assess the suitability of your project idea concerning the specific call topic, evaluate the technical comprehensibility of your concept and check compliance with formal aspects. Our expertise from analysing the reviewers' comments in the Evaluation Summary Reports (ESRs) of previous calls is also incorporated into this process.

The following template is optionally available for the outline consultation, which asks for the essential elements for the application. However, the use of this form is not mandatory.

Our service is free of charge and all information will be treated confidentially.

2.4.1 Template for idea paper and proposal checks

Personal and project information

Name:

Organization/Company:

Phone:

E-mail:

Project title:

Project acronym:

Programme in which the

submission is planned: Horizon Europe: ☐ Digital Europe: ☐

Topic in which the submission is planned:

Funding measure:

(e.g., CSA, IA, RIA, ..)

Are you the coordinator of the project? Yes ☐ No ☐

Are there already project partners? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, which ones? (Organization and Country)

What is the planned funding amount?

Brief description of the project

What are the technology readiness levels you are focusing on?

Expected Results (Expected Outcome)

Do you have concrete questions that you would like to ask here?

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