

Most Frequent Mistakes in Twinning Proposals: What to be Aware of

This article describes the most frequent mistakes observed in the proposals submitted to the 2017 Twinning call. 'Most frequent mistakes' means the comments made by independent experts that appeared in the Evaluation Summary Reports several times and had a negative impact on scoring. Our aim is to draw the applicants' attention to issues they should be aware of to avoid losing precious points and improve their chances of succeeding in the competition. We strongly recommend that the applicants check this list carefully and make sure their proposal is free of these issues.

The most frequent comments that the experts made have been divided into three blocks according to the structure of the Coordination and Support Action (CSA) proposal template, Technical Annex (Part B), i.e. Excellence, Impact and Implementation. Within these three blocks, the most frequent mistakes related to specific issues are grouped to make them easier to find.

Criterion: Excellence

Within this part, the evaluators are asked to take into account the extent to which the proposed work corresponds to the topic description in the call text as well as to the relevant work programme. The evaluators then check the clarity and pertinence of the objectives, the credibility of the proposed methodology and the soundness of the concept. Finally, they assess the quality of the proposed CSA measures. The following issues flagged by the evaluators as problematic are:

1. SWOT analysis

- proposed methodology lacks proper SWOT analysis
- travels are considered as threats
- explanation of strengths and weaknesses of the widening institution justifying proposed methodology is not provided

2. clarity and pertinence of the objectives

- objectives are too generic and vague / not clearly specified with regard to networking gaps and deficiencies of cooperation with internationally leading counterparts
- objective are not measurable and target values and indicators are too general
- objectives are not in line with the proposed tasks in the work plan

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3. concept, methodology and scientific strategy

- description of methodology is weak and lacks enough detail / models and assumptions are not sufficiently clear
- proposed concept is not sufficiently described and therefore is not credible
- clear scientific strategy is missing / consists of a too extensive variety of research areas

4. quality of CSA measures

- activities are not comprehensively integrated into the concept
- neither description nor justification of CSA measures is sufficient
- pathways towards achieving the aims and objectives are not detailed enough

5. partners

- institute from widening country is not properly linked with internationally-leading research institutes since their roles are not appropriately explained
- participants and their levels are not properly defined

6. gender

- gender issues are not sufficiently considered

it is not clearly presented how the aim to increase the ratio of female researchers at all academic levels will be achieved

7. interactions with authorities and stakeholders

- no information regarding existing interactions with national or regional authorities and stakeholders / no explanation on how they would be realized
- interests of stakeholders with no letter of intent are not well documented
- no adequate description of interactions with national stakeholders other than involved parties / actions aiming to connect to researchers at other institutions are unclear
- measures to link with regional stakeholders are insufficiently detailed and lack credibility

Criterion: Impact

In this part, the evaluators are asked to take into account the extent to which the output would contribute to each of the expected impacts stated in the work programme and the call text respectively. Then the experts assess the quality of the proposed measures to exploit and disseminate project results, including intellectual property rights (IPR), and to manage research data where relevant. Finally, they look at the quality of the proposed measures to communicate project activities to different target audiences.

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1. expected impacts

- described not convincingly enough / misunderstood and replaced by actions and outputs
- no clear quantitative and qualitative illustration based on indicators
- how improved capability to apply for competitive research funding will be reached is insufficiently elaborated / increased research excellence and attractivity is not considered
- most of the planned activities could be performed without involvement of other partners

2. dissemination and exploitation (DoE)

- DoE activities are described in general terms / mostly targeting national level
- no coordinated strategy for dissemination to scientific community
- initiating dialogue with policy makers or boosting engagement with industry is not considered
- more measurable indicators for proposed dissemination activities should be included

3. IPR, data and knowledge management

- IPR management is not sufficiently addressed / not included
- data management lacks details / knowledge management and knowledge transfer activities are missing
- efforts to manage research data are not sufficiently detailed

4. communicating the project activities

- communication primarily targets professionals in the same field with limited engagement beyond project partners / categories of target groups are too broad
- communication plan to different groups is not developed and specific measures are missing / it does not consider post-project actions / measures for communication during and after the project are insufficiently planned

Criterion: Implementation

Evaluators have to look at all the aspects that allow for the efficient and effective implementation of the proposed project. Specifically, this means that they have to check the quality and effectiveness of the work plan, including the extent to which the resources assigned to the work packages are in line with their objectives and deliverables. Closely linked to this is the aspect of the appropriateness of the management structures and procedures, including risk and innovation management. The evaluators of course carefully assess the complementarity of the participants and the extent to which the consortium as a whole brings together the necessary expertise.

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Last but not least, the experts look at the appropriateness of the allocation of tasks, ensuring that all participants have a valid role and adequate resources in the project to fulfil that role.

1. work plan and division of tasks

- work packages are not in line with objectives / are not interdependent / WPs on management and dissemination are missing / 18 WPs is too much for CSA
- relation between deliverables and milestones is not clearly set out / milestones are not specified / no deliverables for twinning actions
- work plan is very generic / lacks details / does not justify the budget / Gantt and PERT chart are missing

2. management structures and processes

- are not explained and justified / are too complex / responsibility is not specified
- involvement of leading partners in decision making is not satisfactory
- responsibilities of coordinator are not clearly explained
- plans for dispute settlement between partners are insufficient

3. risk and innovation management

- possible risks are not set out convincingly / are limited / are underestimated
- all critical risks are not addressed / risk and innovation management are poorly described

- mitigation measures are not sufficiently developed / are not convincing
- information on risk analysis and risk management is not provided / is not sufficiently detailed

4. consortium and complementarity of partners

- complementarity is not demonstrated clearly and adequately / partners have significantly overlapping expertise / choice of partners is not clearly justified / no explanation of synergies and complementarity of consortium
- roles and adequate resource allocation to international partners is not specified
- coordinator's limited expertise in managing similar projects is not sufficiently addressed

5. resources and budget

- insufficient PMs for management and dissemination / PMs are overestimated / no justification for equal allocations of PMs to all partners
- tasks are not adequately distributed to partners / tasks lack details and justification
- travel costs differ enormously while PMs and no. of travels are the same
- requested budget is not justified / costs are unbalanced / insufficiently described

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Recommendations

To conclude, we would like to give the potential applicants to the Twinning call a set of recommendations to help them include all the necessary elements and to increase their chances in the grant competition. Firstly, they must be aware that a thorough SWOT analysis forms the basis for a good proposal. They should be self-critical and elaborate especially well on the weaknesses and threats. The analysis results should be then fully incorporated into the action plan and the individual work packages objectives, right down to the level of individual tasks. There should not be too many work packages (5–7 is optimal), bearing in mind that three of them are obligatory: WP on management, WP on communication and dissemination, and WP dedicated to early-stage research, which is a new element in the 2018 call. The management structure should be simple and the roles and responsibilities of the people involved should be described clearly.

The proposal should be clear and brief, structured in short paragraphs, using simple sentences, and avoiding buzzwords and abbreviations where possible. Any interconnection with national and regional RIS3 strategies as well as the use of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) should not be omitted. References to relevant European documents and strategies are of course an asset. Regarding the widening institution, please be aware that the evaluators will check the English version of your website to learn more about you, specifically about your participation in European and international projects. Several documents published recently could help you improve your proposal, e.g. [the EC Social Media Guide](#) published in April 2018, the IPR Helpdesk brochure [Communication, Dissemination and Exploitation](#) from March 2018, and [a blog article by Angela Hengsberger](#) explaining all aspects of innovation management.

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