Task Sheet: How to structure a winning research proposal

One of the keys to winning proposals is to produce a proposal that funders can easily see meets all of the requirements of the call.

As research funding becomes increasingly competitive, funders are specifying the requirements more and more precisely. Most specify the maximum length of the proposal, and many now include a scoring matrix which specifies the specific criteria they are looking for, and what proportion of the overall score is attached to each of the criteria.

It is therefore important to structure the proposal and provide convincing evidence that the proposal meets the criteria in a way that makes it easy for reviewers to score it, and to provide information roughly in proportion to the weight of the criteria. If for a 10 page proposal 10% of the score is on the originality of the research question, 50% is on methodology and 40% is on pathways to impact it would be sensible to have 1 page on the research question, 5 pages on the methodology and 4 pages on pathways to impact.

The simplest way to do this is to structure the proposal with sections that correspond to each of the criteria. But sometimes that doesn't align with the description of the research project as a whole, and sometimes donors specify the structure of the proposal. In which case it is important to highlight – maybe with sub-headings, or with boxes – the evidence you want them to see clearly when they are scoring your proposal. Some donors even ask you to use paragraph numbering, and to fill out a table showing which paragraphs contain information about each criteria.

So the first step when starting to draft a winning proposal is to develop an outline of the structure, decide roughly how many pages each section should be, and to bullet-point the content that needs to be in each section.

That will usually evolve and may change substantially during the drafting process, and it is important to leave room for things that may not be requested but either make the proposal easier to read (like an introduction) or demonstrates how it aligns not just with the specific call, but also with the values and wider interests of the funder.

There is no right answer, or prescriptive approach that will guarantee success, but as bit of preparation to maximise your chance of success before starting to write will certainly help.

Annex 1 includes an example of what that might look like for a proposal to do an evaluation of a higher education capacity development programme in Africa. It includes a 1-page summary of the call for proposals, and the outline proposal. This is based on a real project which we won, but has been simplified and modified for anonymity.

Annex 2 includes a 5 fictitious 1-page calls for proposals in different sectors – though all have the same general requirements and scoring framework. Pick one which is close to you area of interest and try drafting a proposal outline yourself.

Annex 1: A request for proposal for an evaluation of the Africa Higher Education Project

Introduction

The Africa Higher Education Programme (AHEP) project supports the educational development capacity of academics by providing training on pedagogy, quality assurance and technological platforms and enhancing regional collaboration and teaching quality by enabling the sharing of quality-assured, credit-bearing blended modules between universities across the region.

The objectives of the evaluation are:

1. To assess achievement of the project toward meeting expected results, based on the Theory of Change and the log frame.
2. To assess whether the project has been implemented in accordance with the expectations and met targeted outcomes fully.
3. To evaluate the impact/change in partner universities and how the project has contributed to these changes.
4. To draw lessons that inform to future programming and assess accountability status for further learning

Evaluation process

AHEP has been highly participatory, collaborative, and has emphasised capacity development and empowerment of partner university staff. The evaluation should be done in a way which reinforces that process.

Evaluation outputs

The evaluation should deliver the following outputs:

be, but the evaluation should this is not just an academic exercise, research outputs should include:

- An inception report with detailed methodology
- Interim outputs discussed in workshops with project participants
- A rigorous and robust final report capturing both the evaluation evidence and result of discussions with partners
- A summary report for external publication.

The proposal

Proposals should be not more than 12 pages and should outline previous evaluation experience, approach and methodology, process of engagement with partners, description of the final outputs and a budget including breakdown by activity.

Scoring criteria

Qualification to deliver the evaluation (40%)	
Understanding of the task and qualifications	10%
Track record of similar work	10%
Quality and experience of the team	20%
Approach (40%)	
Overall approach.	10%
Detailed methodology	20%
Outputs	10%
Management (20%)	
Value for Money (VfM)	5%
Timeline	5%
Budget	10%
Total	**100%**

The outline proposal

1. **Introduction (1 page)**
- Summary of the whole proposal

2. Our Understanding of the task (½ page)
- Summary of the requirements as in the terms of reference
- Comments and qualifications about the ToR
  - Our commitment in terms of scale and scope (given the small budget)
  - The impact of covid-19

3. Organisational profile (3 pages)
- INASP general experience with evaluations
- INASP approach to evaluations
- Examples of previous evaluations
- Description of the evaluation team (people/roles etc)

4. Technical proposal (5 pages)
- Clarification of the research questions (½ page)
- Introduction to the overarching methodology (1 page)
  - Description
  - Where it has been used before
  - Why it will be good for this evaluation
- The approach in detail (3½ pages)
  - Stages (inception, document review, new data collection, data aggregation & analysis)
  - Outputs (inception report, interim report, final report)
  - Involvement of other stakeholders (in new data collection, analysis and final workshop to generate recommendations)
  - Length, shape & style of the final report

5. Timeline (1 page)
- Gantt chart

6. Budget (1 page)
- Total budget by item (fees / reimbursables etc)
- Amount of effort for each stage / output

Annex 2: Example Research Calls

1. A call for research proposals on pro-poor agricultural innovation systems for sustainable and resilient agri-food systems.

Introduction

This call is for proposals to implement a project on 'Pro-poor agricultural innovation systems for sustainable and resilient agri-food systems'. The overall goal is to empower poor rural women and men in developing countries to improve their incomes and food security.

The research should:

- Promote innovative, pro-poor approaches and technologies with the potential to be scaled up
- for greater impact
- Strengthen partners' institutional and policy capacities.
- Enhance advocacy and policy engagement.
- Generate and share knowledge for development impact.

Research process

The research should be done in ways that promote and demonstrate the value of equitable partnerships, local capacity development, policy engagement and research uptake.

Research outputs

The research should be rigorous and robust, but this is not just an academic exercise, research outputs should include:

- At least one publication in an open access peer-reviewed journal.
- Outputs specifically designed for relevant local policy and practitioner audiences.
- Dialogues, workshops or seminars with key stakeholders.
- Evidence-based policy briefs for local and international research funders.

The proposal

Proposals should be not more than 10 pages including the research question, research methodology, approach to implementation, pathway to impact, timeline and qualifications and experience of the research team.

Scoring criteria

Focus and contribution of the research to knowledge (25%)	
The research question and how it contributes to the existing literature	15%
Evidence of demand for this new knowledge from likely users.	10%
Approach (25%)	
Research methodology – robustness of the research and research ethics.	10%
How the research and approach will build local capacity.	15%
Research outputs (20%)	
The proposed research outputs and identification of research users	10%
Approach to impact (narrative + theory of change)	10%
The research team (20%)	
Quality of team leader, academic background and experience of collaborative research programmes.	10%
Composition and quality of other team members, and local partners.	10%
Management (10%)	
Feasibility of management arrangements and ability to undertake the project successfully	5%
Value for Money (VfM) of total costs including; expenses, number and allocation of days	5%
otal	**100%**

2. A call for research proposals on health systems in low-income countries.

The research

The purpose of this scheme is to provide funding for the best proposals to generate new knowledge to strengthen and improve health systems in LMICs. The programme's aims are to fund methodologically rigorous, high-quality interdisciplinary research that will:

- generate evidence on:
  - the structure and dynamics of health systems
  - how to strengthen and improve health systems for people living in LMICs through the delivery of evidence-based interventions or structural changes (for example strengthening governance, management, health workforce or supply chain).
- provide evidence that is of direct relevance to decision makers and practitioners in the field, linking health systems with defined outcomes (for example: health, confidence, financial protection)
- demonstrate an appreciation of current theories and frameworks in health systems research and/or other social or political science theory of relevance to health systems
- where focused on a particular aspect of the health system, proposals must demonstrate how interventions relate to and affect wider elements of the system such as governance, financing, health workforce, information systems, service delivery, etc.

Research process

The research should be done in ways that promote and demonstrate the value of equitable partnerships, local capacity development, policy engagement and research uptake.

Research outputs

The research should be rigorous and robust, but this is not just an academic exercise, research outputs should include:

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- Outputs specifically designed for relevant local policy and practitioner audiences.
- Dialogues, workshops or seminars with key stakeholders.
- Evidence-based policy briefs for local and international research funders.

The proposal

Proposals should be not more than 10 pages including the research question, research methodology, approach to implementation, pathway to impact, timeline and qualifications and experience of the research team.

Scoring criteria

Focus and contribution of the research to knowledge (25%)	
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Research methodology – robustness of the research and research ethics.	10%
How the research and approach will build local capacity.	15%
Research outputs (20%)	
The proposed research outputs and identification of research users	10%
Approach to impact (narrative + theory of change)	10%
The research team (20%)	
Quality of team leader, academic background and experience of collaborative research programmes.	10%
Composition and quality of other team members, and local partners.	10%
Management (10%)	
Feasibility of management arrangements and ability to undertake the project successfully	5%
Value for Money (VfM) of total costs including; expenses, number and allocation of days	5%
Total	**100%**

3. A call for action-research proposals on AI and Machine Learning tools for a Social Learning Platform.

The research

Online platforms are frequently used to enable researchers and other stakeholders to collaborate on action-research projects seeking solutions to development challenges. But while good for storing documents and hosting online discussions, they could be much more interactive, and could harvest knowledge from other platforms and sites using AI and machine learning tools. This call is for proposals to research and then pilot innovative apps and tools. The overall goal of the programme is to both identify possible apps and tools and build a global community of practise to develop and test them further.

The research should:

- Review existing apps and tools and identify possible innovations
- Convene a group of potential users who will pilot-test and then review the innovations through a series of online workshops.
- Develop a scalable model for wider use.
- Generate and share knowledge for the wider programme.

Research process

The research should be done in ways that promote and demonstrate the value of collaborative partnerships, build local capacity and develop a network of stakeholders interested to collaborate further.

Research outputs

The research should be rigorous and robust, but this is not just an academic exercise, research outputs should include:

- At least one publication in an open access peer-reviewed journal.
- A small number of pilotable ideas for proof-of-concept testing.
- Dialogues, workshops or seminars with key stakeholders.
- One app or tool design suitable to wider testing.

The proposal

Proposals should be not more than 10 pages including the research question, research methodology, approach to implementation, pathway to impact, timeline and qualifications and experience of the research team.

Scoring criteria

Focus and contribution of the research to knowledge (25%)	
The research focus and how it contributes to the existing literature	15%
Evidence of demand for this new app or tool from likely users.	10%
Approach (25%)	
Research methodology – robustness of the research and research ethics.	10%
How the approach will build local capacity.	15%
Research outputs (20%)	
The proposed research outputs and identification of research users	10%
Approach to piloting	10%
The research team (20%)	
Quality of team leader, academic background and experience of collaborative research programmes.	10%
Composition and quality of other team members, and local partners.	10%
Management (10%)	
Feasibility of management arrangements and ability to undertake the project successfully	5%
Value for Money (VfM) of total costs including; expenses, number and allocation of days	5%
Total	**100%**