How to write a winning proposal for Horizon Europe

What will you learn in this module?

In this module you will learn about …

- Proposal writing objectives and approach
- Structuring the project framework
- Designing projects for impact
- Planning the proposal writing process
- Writing a compelling proposal narrative

This module will take you through the process of writing a proposal, with a focus on Horizon Europe programme funding. The first step in proposal development is developing an understanding of the objectives for the programme you are applying or the actual call and its overall connection to the EU-level strategies and policies. This information will be useful for conceptualisation of the overall project proposal and its different sections. Based on this input, the project proposal should be structured to meet the call objectives and additionally to have a logical framework designed for social impact. Since Horizon Europe applications consist of an extensive number of sections and require clear, concise and to the point writing, the process of proposal writing should be planned out in advance. Finally, the writing itself should address the questions in different sections of the application and address the following questions: Why this? Why now? What aim? Why like this? Why you?

Understanding the Proposal Writing Objectives

Writing project proposals and especially writing proposals for the Horizon Europe funding schemes is an important element of career development for researchers and business professionals in Europe. It is a skill that takes one's research and career on the next level. The amount of funding available through the Horizon Europe programmes is significantly higher than most funding options available through national grants and considerably advances research, education, valorisation and networking activities. Moreover, it fosters collaborative regional and international partnerships between universities and various other social stakeholders, public and private institutions, industry, SMEs and NGOs. As such, it supports the professional growth of academics and professionals, and at the same time provides a basis for institutional development for universities and businesses. Considering the benefits that being able to write excellent project proposals brings forth, it is evident that investing time and effort in mastering this skill is quite worthwhile. Yet, even though most academics have experience and skills in research and writing, many still hesitate from engaging in project proposal writing. Or, when they do write proposals, they utilise an approach and style that reflects academic research rather than business or social intervention. In fact, the first step in mastering the skill of project proposals writing is understanding the objectives of that process in broader and narrower sense.

In a broader context, purpose of writing a project proposal is to address a problem, which might be of a scientific, technological, industrial or social nature. From the onset, proposal writing is a process through which a problem is defined and an intervention that should address the problem is designed. As such, proposals conceptualise connections between issues to indicate where an intervention is necessary and why. Proposals design interventions that aim to have an impact and bring forth a certain change in contrast to the existing state of things. Compared to traditional

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academic research which might be of fundamental or explorative nature, project proposals are impact oriented. Our research on university-business collaboration indicates that the skills in designing impact-oriented projects/research are highly valued by European universities and business, but are, at the same time, quite rare to find in individuals. The ability to design projects and research for impact highlights an in-depth understanding of issues at stake, the interconnections of these issues and how change should be addressed. Therefore, beside possessing knowledge of the topical and technical aspects of the project or research, such in-depth understanding would also include strong managerial and organizational aspects of how the knowledge production in that specific initiative/study should be structured. Thus, this competency underlines the ability to understand needs, interests and values of all stakeholders alongside the technical expertise.
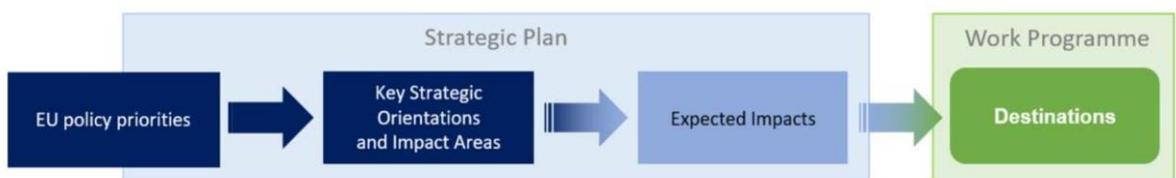
In a narrower sense, writing project proposals specifically for the Horizon Europe granting schemes requires good understanding of objectives of specific programmes and how interventions should be designed. In comparison to earlier funding approach for Horizon 2020 that were activity-driven, the European Commission now places a great emphasis on the impact of proposed interventions. The Horizon Europe is "an impact-driven framework progamme" which is reflected in how programmes are structured: they are organised around 'Destinations', describing the expected impacts identified in the Strategic Planning, and 'topics', describing the related expected outcomes critical to the achievement of such impacts, see figure x.

Therefore, the first step in the project proposal writing process is an in-depth understanding of objectives of the specific call open under the Horizon Europe granting scheme. This understanding should entail the comprehension not only of topics but also of the desired approach and suggested design of interventions. This information should then be taken into consideration when designing the methodological approach for the proposed intervention and its impact. Another aspect which is useful to consider before starting the proposal writing is a detailed review and understanding of the evaluation criteria for the specific call. This information includes the evaluation approach and questions evaluators will use to assess and score project proposals (European Commission, 2021). Programmes under the Horizon Europe funding scheme have been restructured compared to the Horizon 2020, see figure x. It can be useful to explore different programme options to understand which one is the best fit for a potential project and the consortium.
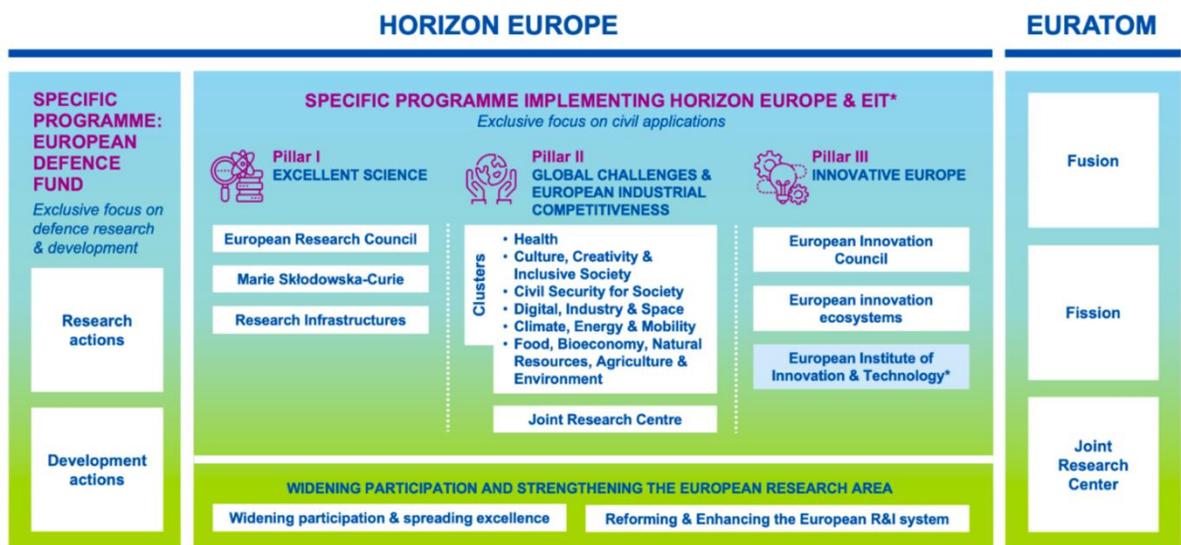
> ☞ Tip: review past and ongoing EU projects
>
> *A useful approach for beginners in writing project proposals is to review successful projects the European Commission has funded earlier. CORDIS website and Projects & Results (links bellow) include overview of past and ongoing funded projects. These provide useful insights how projects have been designed and partnerships established.*

Figure x *From EU Priorities to Work Programme Destinations (Source: Horizon Europe (HORIZON) Programme Guide)*

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HORIZON EUROPE

EURATOM

SPECIFIC PROGRAMME: EUROPEAN DEFENCE FUND
Exclusive focus on defence research & development

Research actions

Development actions

SPECIFIC PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTING HORIZON EUROPE & EIT*
Exclusive focus on civil applications

Pillar I EXCELLENT SCIENCE

European Research Council

Marie Skłodowska-Curie

Research Infrastructures

Pillar II GLOBAL CHALLENGES & EUROPEAN INDUSTRIAL COMPETITIVENESS

Clusters
- Health
- Culture, Creativity & Inclusive Society
- Civil Security for Society
- Digital, Industry & Space
- Climate, Energy & Mobility
- Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture & Environment

Joint Research Centre

Pillar III INNOVATIVE EUROPE

European Innovation Council

European innovation ecosystems

European Institute of Innovation & Technology*

WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND STRENGTHENING THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA

Widening participation & spreading excellence

Reforming & Enhancing the European R&I system

Fusion

Fission

Joint Research Center

* The European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) is not part of the Specific Programme

European Commission

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Figure x *Horizon Europe programmes structure (Source: European Commission, 2022)*

Suggested readings

Horizon Europe (HORIZON) Programme Guide – link (guidebook)

This Guide includes information about Horizon Europe structure, objectives, partnerships, ethical rules and links, gender and inclusiveness approaches and various other information.

Horizon Europe Open Calls – link (webpage)

To apply for a Horizon Europe grant you need to identify open calls on the Horizon Europe Funding & tender opportunities webpage. Calls are searchable through keywords and filters (destinations, missions, priorities, etc.).

Horizon Europe Proposal Evaluation - link (guidebook)

Read about the evaluation process and criteria for different Horizon Europe programmes and questions evaluators will use to assess and score project proposals.

Tools

IT How to… Horizon Europe – link (webpage)

The European Commission has prepared online tools and visual guides on how to prepare and submit a proposal. Here you can find information on proposal forms and how to access and prepare them.

CORDIS Research results - link (webpage)

The Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS) is the European Commission's primary source of results from the projects funded by the EU's framework programmes for research and innovation (FP1 to Horizon 2020).

Structuring the Proposal Framework

Once the general objectives and approach of a potential project are identified, the proposal writing process can start. However, for most Horizon Europe programmes an application starts with submission of a concept note. In such cases, the proposal consists of a 2-stage application procedure. Firstly, the concept note is submitted, and if the concept is successful, then secondly, drafting and submission of the full project proposal can take place. A concept note is an outline of a research or applied project proposal which is submitted as a basis for seeking funding. The Concept note includes the main information about the proposed project in shorter text: the background and description of the project, a justification of why project is needed, the consortium and a description of work packages and activities.

However, before or alongside preparation of the concept note, it is highly useful to outline the general project methodology, and logically structure all elements in the project to ensure cohesion between them. Namely, based on the review of objectives for the specific call and evaluation criteria, the initial design of the intervention from the project proposal can be drafted in a concept note and/or in a logical framework matrix. These are usual tools many project developers use.

The Logical Framework Matrix provides the structure through which coherence between the identified problem and the proposed interventions that should lead towards a solution can be checked and strengthened. It provides an explanation on how, in given context, the planned project outputs will lead to desired outcomes, and how outcomes will lead to expected impact.

This step can be taken if someone has sufficiency information on the actual problem and solution which will be articulated in the project proposal. In cases where proposal writer is assisting other researchers or working collaboratively with a large team, she/he will need to consult collaborators on specific aspects of the project proposal for their input and insights. This collaborative approach requires the organisations of meeting, consultative sessions and collaborative planning and writing sessions which are oftentimes time consuming.

Therefore, the process of structuring the proposal framework and writing the actual proposal require significant amounts of time that should be planned for and taken into consideration. For this purpose, it is useful to develop a timeline for the whole proposal writing process and include information on specific tasks, necessary deliverables, responsibilities, and deadlines. As such, the proposal writing process, especially for larger Horizon Europe programmes and bigger consortiums, is a project of its self or should be
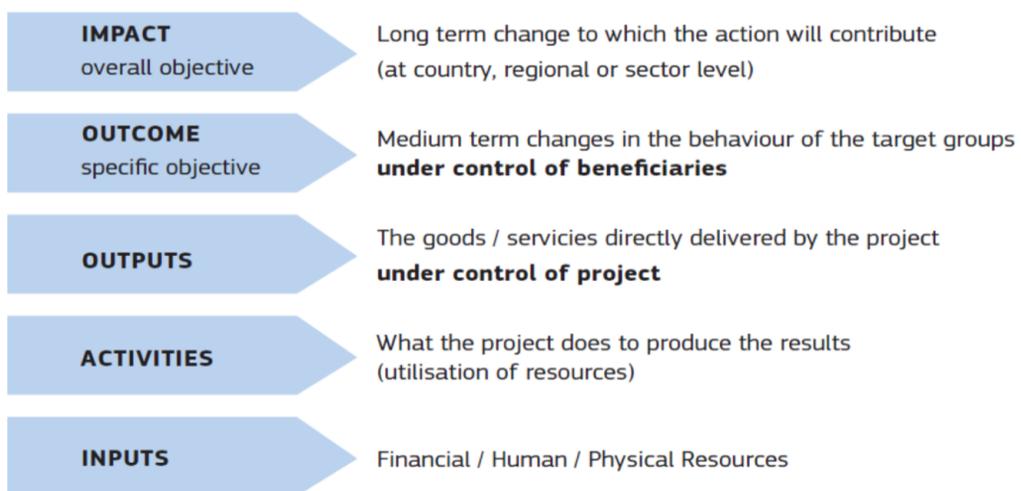

Figure x Components of a Results Chain (Source: OECD DAC)

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seen as part of the project, which usually takes from several months up to one year.

> ☞ Tip: From the inception, design project for impact
>
> *Use the result-based management and the logical framework matrix meticulously to ensure the proposed project is designed for impact. A good approach to do this is to develop human-centered solutions. However, do not start with the solution but rather start with the problem and think about the people and diverse stakeholders involved in the situation. How are different stakeholders involved in problem and what do they need/want? What kind of changes are currently underway and what kind of opportunities they bring? How does your proposed project utilize existing opportunities for impact? How will you provide value for different stakeholders?*

A useful tool for planning time both during the proposal writing process and the entire project implementation is a Gantt chart (see figure x), where work packages, milestones or tasks can be listed over specific periods of time in a visual manner.

Suggested readings

Horizon Europe Steps for applying – link (webpage)

The webpage provides overview of all steps for the application process and includes web links to additional information and webpages.

Logical Framework Approach – link and link (webpages)

The Logical Framework Approach is a useful tool when thinking and designing a project as it provides a methodological approach in structuring relationships between planned projects.

Suggested readings cont.

PERT Chart – link (webpage)

A PERT chart or diagram is a project management tool used to schedule, organise and coordinate tasks within a project. It provides a graphical representation of a project's timeline that enables project managers to break down each individual task in the project for analysis.

Horizon Europe Application Events – link (webpage)

On this webpage you can find links to webinars on different aspects of the application process. It includes links to past events with video recordings.

Tools

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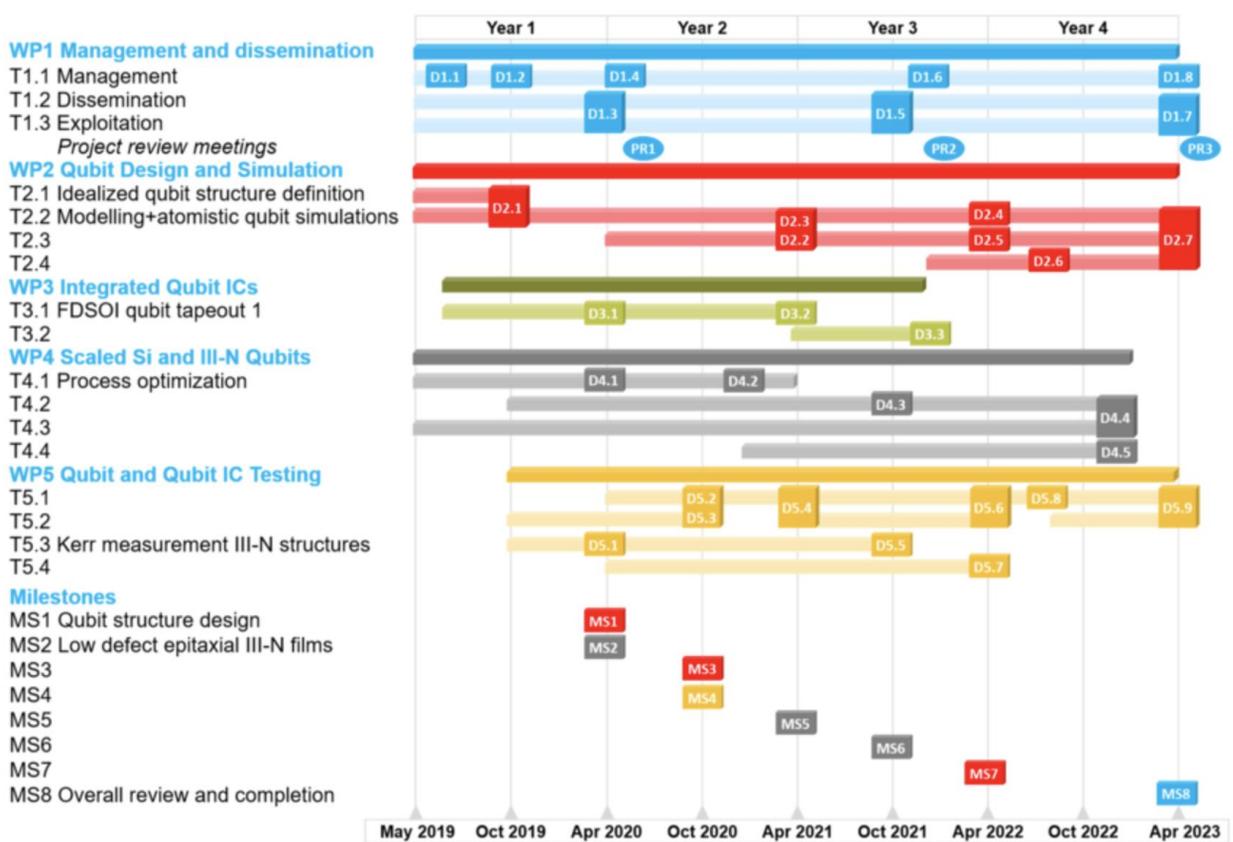

Figure x Example of a Gantt chart (taken from the IQubits project website. Project funded Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Source: IQubits)

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Constructing A Convincing Narrative about a Compelling Intervention

Both of the previous sections highlight impact as the focus of the proposal writing process. This section will do the same, but here attention is focussed on the roadmap or the vision towards the expected impact, which is basically the core of the project proposal. The main objective of the proposed project is to convince evaluators to fund the project. Researchers might have an in-depth understanding of a field and necessary interventions, but the proposal writing entails communicating this information to others who might not have similar or any expertise in the given area.

This is a useful process for the implementing researchers and professionals as it pushes them to rethink the dynamic between problems and challenges that will be addressed in a highly systematic manner and ensure that complex circumstances and risks will be mitigated. This process is useful because it identifies assumptions which are used by those involved and forces them to rethink these in order to remove any lack of clarity or uncertainty.

Therefore, the project proposal should be a convincing narrative about a compelling intervention. To do so, the project proposal should be written in a concise and clear manner and writing style. In order to achieve this, the proposal should clearly stipulate why the problem that the project addresses is important, why the problem should be tackled now, how the proposed intervention will ensure the expected impact, as well as why the proposed consortium is the right team to do it.

The relevance of the problem should come first as providing an answer to why something needs to be done justifies the action. In proposals, the relevance of the problem is described in the background information on the state of the art and the needs analysis. Here, the problem should be clearly stipulated and provided arguments should demonstrate why the problem matters and for whom. What happens if the problem is left unsolved? What kind of changes will take place if problem is mitigated? Even in the case where researchers are working on a specific item or a technology, the connection to larger social issues should be made and highlighted.

Another important aspect of the problem definition is specifying it in relation to the planned intervention. If a proposal describes a problem where only additional resources are necessary (human or material) then this might not be a convincing basis for justifying the project. Instead, the problem should stem out of an intervention where novel research is indispensable since the solution cannot simply be met by industry or the government alone. Moreover, the intervention should rely on the utilisation of interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinary approaches and the involvement of experimentation and pilot testing over longer periods of time. This is especially relevant for the Horizon Europe programmes.

The next step in the proposal argumentation is an explanation of why the problem is relevant at the particular time of the application. Why should the problem be addressed at this point of time? How is it connected to earlier developments and issues? Are new opportunities arising to solve an already existing problem or is the problem emerging as a novel development due to recent changes? Why should resources be allocated to solving this problem?

Additionally, since the same or similar problems are addressed by other researchers and stakeholders, showcasing what kind of approaches others have been using in comparison to the proposed intervention is very important. This attests to the social or industrial understanding of the problem and differentiates and justifies the project.

As stressed earlier, the impact section is also quite important for the Horizon Europe evaluation scores. Here the impact presents not only the overall objective of the project but is also the influence that the proposed intervention will have

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on the market, industry, technology, environment or society in general in the long run. Here, a roadmap of how this influence will be ensured should be clearly planned out. The main aim of the impact description is demonstrating that the project will produce valuable results that will be tested and put to immediate business, public or technical use and bring forth meaningful change for the target groups. Thus, to be able to persuasively demonstrate impact, in-depth understanding of the end users of project outputs and their needs should be evident.

Ultimately, a compelling intervention needs to showcase how the consortium/project team is the right group of stakeholders and professionals to make the proposed solution a reality. In the proposal application this means demonstrating and highlighting capacities that are relevant to the activities and work packages that organizations and individuals will be leading, as well as a good structure for the project management, division of roles, dissemination and communication activities, and the risk mitigation approach.

Finally, the proposal should directly address all questions in the application form. Oftentimes, certain sections include multiple questions that should be answered. Once the proposal is written, it is useful to doublecheck that nothing was left out. Evaluators will spend limited time reading the proposal, which means it is of great importance that the text is clear and coherent. All sections in the proposed projects should be connected, meaning that the proposal should be consistent in used terms but also present a coherent narrative. In other words, the proposal needs to showcase a captivating scenario whose impeding impact both convinces evaluators as well as motivates involved researchers and professionals to devote their time and effort in substantive and meaningful project actions.

Suggested readings

How to Write a Winning Project Proposal – link (article)

This Medium article by Nick Feamster offers valuable advice on proposal writing based on author's experience in winning projects.

How to write a convincing Impact Section for a Horizon Europe proposal – link (article)

This article provides more information on writing the Impact section.

Tools

Horizon Europe Programme Standard Application Form (HE RIA, IA). Application form (Part A). Project proposal – Technical description (Part B) – link (document)

The document is the Project proposal template for the Horizon Europe application.

Publications Office of the European Union – link (webpage)

This website contains publications, including various reports on specific issues, which can be useful for mapping the state of the art in many fields in Europe.

Free online course: Better Business Writing in English – link (online course)

An important skill for clear and coherent writing is mastering English.

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Common mistakes in preparing proposals

Why this? Why now? What aim? Why like this? Why you?

Why this? Why now?
- The topic is not aligned with the focus of the call e.g. call specifies university-business cooperation in higher education and the proposal is prepared about innovation in higher education generally
- The project is not innovative enough or has been done before
- The reason why this project is absolutely necessary is not clearly explained
- The specific problem you are addressing is not described clearly and aligned with the outcomes you expect from the project
- The urgency for addressing the problem is not clear
- This isn't a strong impact beyond the project finish and beyond the project consortium

What aim? Why like this?
- There is no clear primary aim or sub-aims described
- There is a lack of connection between (i) the aims and (ii) the activities in the project and (iii) the expected outcomes
- The method or approach described in the project isn't likely to get the outcome desired
- The timeline for the project doesn't allow sufficient time for successful project completion, proper target group engagement, or time to create impact
- The project is challenging but not feasible in the time or budget or with the consortium in the project
- Adequate quality measures and processes are not in place
- The finance requested doesn't match the workload in the different work-packages

Why you?

Not the right:
- mix of partners
- amount of partners
- expertise
- geographic spread

Process problems
- Not having someone dedicated to managing the process of creating the proposal including acquiring consortium partners
- Not having a small team of drafters to keep consistency in the proposal
- Not have the financials done by someone experienced in the call or in creating project financials

Writing errors
- Not responding to the questions or the points requested in the call
- The language of your proposal does not match that of the call e.g. focus on sustainability whilst the call asks for the circular economy
- Using a mix of terms rather than consistent use of terms e.g. using all of green, sustainable. circular economy, regenerative… at various points during the proposal.

Are you an educator?

You can click here to go to the syllabus on page xx. This syllabus includes suggestions on the delivery of the module.

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