



## BE-Rural Capacity building Workshop for researchers and SMEs on

### “How to participate in international research and innovation in the bioeconomy“

Overview	
Date	25 & 27 October 2021
Location	Online via Zoom
Aim of the event	<p>The workshop aimed to enhance the capacities of researchers and businesses within the OIPs to engage in effective research &amp; innovation (R&amp;I) activities and cooperation. The particular objectives of the event were to deliver content on ‘how to’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Find sources of inter/national R&amp;I funding</li> <li>(ii) Identify suitable calls in Horizon Europe programme</li> <li>(iii) Use the EU Funding and Tender Portal</li> <li>(iv) Start preparing your project proposal</li> <li>(v) Learn about best practices and how to avoid common mistakes</li> </ul>

#### Short summary

To enhance the capacities of researchers and SMEs to engage in research and innovation (R&I) activities and cooperation in the bioeconomy, the BE-Rural project organised a capacity building workshop for these stakeholder groups. The workshop has been primarily targeted at the five BE-Rural innovation regions (Vidzeme and Kurzeme in Latvia; Szczecin and Vistula Lagoons in Poland; Covasna in Romania; Stara Zagora in Bulgaria; and Strumica in North Macedonia), but other attendees were welcome as well. The capacity building workshop was run by the European Policies Research Centre (EPRC) at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland.

The workshop took place in **virtual format** over **two days**. The first day focused on **sources of funding for R&I in the bioeconomy**, while the second one looked at various **aspects of preparing a successful R&I proposal** and sharing of experiences in this regard amongst peers. Presentations are made available at the event’s webpage.

This seminar was attended by 50 people representing predominantly academic institutions, together with cluster and municipal representatives. **66 percent of participants were female**. As

informed by a poll, **50% of the participants were considering to apply for EU R&I funding** in the field of the bioeconomy at the time of the workshop.

**Stefan Kah of EPRC** opened the capacity building workshop by presenting the BE-Rural project and the objectives of the event. He also provided an overview of EU funding sources for R&I in the period 2021-27. EU funding that covers R&I activities can be broadly divided into funding that falls under direct management by the European Commission through executive agencies (e.g. Horizon Europe) and shared management with the Member States (e.g. Rural Development Policy; Cohesion Policy).

The first day of the workshop featured also presentations from the **National Contact Point** for Horizon Europe in Poland - **Bożena Podlaska**, from **BBI JU** - **Ana Cuadrado Galván**, and from the **Strathclyde Research & Knowledge Exchange Services** - **Katie Robinson**. These presentations looked closer at Horizon Europe Cluster 6 as a source of R&I funding, provided an overview of bioeconomy projects already taking place in the five countries where the BE-Rural innovation regions are located (funded by BBI JU), and built capacities around the usage of the EU Funding and Tender Portal.

**Martin Gregory** of the **Strathclyde Research & Knowledge Exchange Services** kicked off the second day of the workshop with a comprehensive presentation on how to move from an idea to proposal by providing hints and tips for preparing a successful application. Further on the second day, two peers with extensive experience in the EU framework programmes shared their knowledge and advice on how to prepare a successful proposal based on own success stories and professional experience. These were **Hannah Jaenicke** of the **Horticulture Competence Centre (KoGa)** at the University of Bonn and **Laia Llenas Argelaguet** of **BETA Technological Centre** at University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia.

To allow participants to exchange experiences and connect with each other, this workshop featured **two small group discussions**.

### Discussion 1 (Day 1)

**What are your research and innovation priorities (R&I agenda) in the bioeconomy (this may relate to the regional/national or international R&I priorities)?**

**What kind of barriers are there to participate in bioeconomy R&I activities?**

Among R&I interests and priorities, participants mentioned

- Forestry and growing trees (Latvia);
- Pilot projects for using bio-waste for composting (Romania);
- Utilisation of agricultural residues and sustainable heating and cooling (North Macedonia);
- Bringing bio-based fertilisers to the market.

In terms of challenges and barriers, participants mentioned

- **Insufficient actions** at national and/or regional level **to facilitate access to market** of sustainable innovations (e.g. launching prototypes in a region) and to raise public awareness about bio-based alternatives that are in the pipeline.
- Market uptake of bio-based innovations sometimes fails because of **too strict EU regulatory framework**.



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- As a concrete example, one of the participants shared their experience from an EU project aimed at developing a platform that would produce crop fertilisers and insulation materials from waste wool feedstock derived from the textile industry. Although the feedstock was largely available, the **lack of consumer acceptance** and **awareness** coupled with **regulatory market-access barriers** made it difficult to upgrade this business model to an industry standard. An important question to which the discussion led was how helpful it would be to set up a consortium of partners facing similar market-access difficulties.
- Low level of engagement in the bioeconomy among citizens but also within academia. Need to more actively involve students.
- **Silos** between research fields (e.g. bio-refinery and nature protection)
- **Missing link between universities and businesses** and need for this link to be consolidated so that research results reach the market.
- The European Commission does not seem keen to fund R&I projects where lead partners are smaller institutes due to concerns of capacities (presumed need to be part of larger organisation such as university to prove sufficient capacity to lead a project).
- Barriers to non-EU countries to have equal access to funds and be involved on equal footing.

## Discussion 2 (Day 2):

**What are your experiences with getting involved in EU funded R&I programmes?**

**Have you been successful with obtaining R&I funding and what do you think are the key success factors? What are the mistakes you've made?**

The majority of participants has been involved in at least one EU-funded project, with some of them having practical experience in preparing applications, while others have been involved in the implementation phase. Some partners have recently submitted bids and have been awaiting the outcomes.

Shaping up a consortium with diverse partners (in terms of expertise) and well defined tasks has been mentioned by multiple participants. When it comes down to joining an existing consortium of partners or shaping up a new one it may be a challenge to **know the partners well enough to ensure that everyone's expertise is explored as efficiently as possible**. The COVID-19 pandemic and the switch from physical to online meetings and networking settings did not make this exercise an easy one.

When projects are based on case studies, it is important to **select diverse cases & partners, respectfully**, covering different geographies across Europe.

In addition to knowing well your (future) partners, **having an acute knowledge about your project stakeholders** was crucial for an impactful implementation of a project (e.g. your target audiences, project advisors, sister projects, etc.).

Talking from experience, group members agreed that **failed proposals should be the best learning experiences**. It was advised that failures should never be taken as definitive. There are always opportunities to learn from them and repackage an unaccepted proposal.

Three major parameters can define the success or failure of a project proposal:

- Impact: Ambitious but realistic **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** must be laid out in the first stage of your project proposal.



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- **Excellence:** What will differentiate your project from other existing project, what gaps will be filled through the implementation of your projects, how it will stand out and be a unique proposal; all these questions must be addressed via the identification of strong **Unique Selling Propositions (USPs)** in the proposal.
- **Implementation:** It is crucial to show the evaluators that you clearly know how the project will be implemented. To this end, the project proposal must feature a high level of **clarity**, a coherent WP structure, tested working methods, and a transparent definition of partner roles and contributions. Participants highlighted that sometimes these aspects are considered implicit, while they need to be clearly described.

When preparing a proposal one should spend the majority of effort and time not on the drafting process but in the internal review process. Every single comma of a draft proposal should be reviewed multiple times and from different angles and viewpoints.

### Some conclusions

The young age of workshop participants was viewed positively. The need to educate the youngest researchers, scientists and entrepreneurs who are usually the ones most lacking knowledge and experience on how to participate in EU projects was highlighted and participants felt that this workshop responded to these needs.

Amongst the key challenges identified during the two workshop days is the need for early-career researchers to “get the foot into the door”. This is especially difficult for smaller institutions or for those not linked to universities or other major research organisations. While having the capacities to engage in international research projects is crucial, it is also important to be able to provide evidence of this in the application process. Non-research actors such as SMEs suffer from the lack of consolidated links between businesses and research actors/universities. It is felt that there is a lack of support from policy for that. Also, since the bioeconomy is mostly deployed in regions and at regional scale, regions should be important actors in developing bioeconomy systems. In spite of these challenges, the workshop showed that there are not only already a good number of BE projects in the five BE-Rural countries, but particularly that their number is increasing year by year.

Finally, some of the many practical recommendations for engaging with an international research community and for proposal development can be highlighted:

- Make use of **NCPs** (National Contact Points) and other **support services** (e.g. within a university)
- Speak to **peers**, successful researchers in the specific area of research. Many will be happy to give advice
- Use **brokerage events**, info days etc.
- Familiarise yourself with the **EU Funding and Tenders Portal**: set up a profile, get a PIC (Participant Identification Code) and use it also to find partners
- Follow the three key concepts when preparing a proposal: **excellence – impact – implementation**
- Use the **call documents as a key resource** for your proposal: read and refer to any policies, initiatives, strategies, regulations etc. that are mentioned

Participants’ **feedback**, collected via an online survey on both workshop days, was very positive. The majority rated the workshop content as excellent, highlighting especially the quality of the presentations.



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