Guide to Bid Writing

Introduction
For many learning providers, writing a bid for funding is just another task in the seemingly un-unending number of tasks required to keep a provider in existence. This also can mean that funding applications are part of a reactive short to medium term process rather than as part of the on-going strategic plan.
The dangers to any organisation are obvious. Chasing funding indiscriminately can shift an organisations focus and in extreme cases produce a deskilling effect. There is strong evidence that people who are able to write successful bids do so partly because they are clear about what the project is for, how it is going to be delivered and what the outcomes will be for all concerned. In effect they have a strategy, a costed action plan and the potential funding will allow the implementation of elements of innovation etc which have already been 'planned'.

Part 1: Things to Think About Before Completing the Application
Applying for funding is something that almost all Learning Providers will need to do at some point. However, writing a successful funding bid requires the application of some key skills, in terms of coordination of information, clarity of language with perhaps just a pinch of selling ability. It is generally agreed that the key ingredients to a successful bid are:
··Identifying the appropriate funding stream or agency
··Completing the application/form in a timely fashion
··Providing all the information required accurately and concisely
··Having a good/viable/workable idea

Remember even the very best constructed application may not make up for a poorly thought out 'good idea'. For example how many of the criteria below does your own good idea meet:
··It meets an important and/or urgent need.
··It is based on some form of research
··It is innovative enough to capture the imagination
··It is a 'new' idea
··It is a topical idea fitting in with current Government/National/regional agendas
··It is about new ways of addressing issues of disadvantage, which is a key concern for most funding agencies.
··It is different enough to stand out in a crowd of more ordinary applications.
··It clearly demonstrates value for money or leverage i.e. a small input with lots of output
··It complements and in some cases supplements existing provision
··It involves collaboration with other local/regional/national agencies.
··It's objectives are clear and attainable
··It has easily understood benefits and measurable specific outputs.
··The idea is realistic in the circumstances prevailing and therefore achievable.
··Initial funding may lead to it developing its own income in the long term.
··The idea contains at least some elements of sustainability or exit strategy

Preparation Check List
There are a number of general questions that should be asked of almost any project proposal.
··Can you demonstrate that you have researched the development plans, aims and objectives, of local, regional and national strategic organisations?
··Are the aims and objectives of your organisation transparent?
··Does your proposal meet these and how?
··Do you have a clear idea of the expertise and capacity you have available to achieve the proposed project?
··What will be the outcomes for your organisation and its clients/users/learners/ stakeholders by undertaking this project?
··Are you being clear and transparent about the assumptions which lie behind the idea/project and what evidence do you have for these?
··Have you done any research to ensure that your clients/users/learners/stakeholders want the outcomes of the project?
··Are you sure and can you demonstrate that this project is the best way of achieving your aims?

··If the project is run what things will you not be able to do?
··Does your organisation have the capacity and skills to undertake the project if not what training needs have to be met?
··Can you demonstrate how your organisation would benefit in concrete terms from for example collaborative working?
··Can you demonstrate that you have senior management support or a stakeholder at MD/Principal level?
··Can you demonstrate how others within a collaborative partnership would benefit from working with your organisation?
··Have you examined whether you have the right partners?
··Have all prospective partners got a clear perspective of their respective roles?
··Can you describe the project in plain language to a lay person?
··What would be the consequences of not doing the project?
··Do you have a researched exit strategy if the project is successful? Remember you have an ethical responsibility to the people you work with and to all stakeholders to think about the future of anything you start.
··Have you planned a dissemination strategy to make plain the findings of your project and its tangible outcomes to others?

When you are preparing a bid you need to communicate in clear language what you are going to do/achieve, what will be the impact of the project and how you will demonstrate these changes have actually been achieved. When you have a clear view of what your project is seeking to achieve you can then look at potential funders. Being clear about what you are trying to do makes it easier to run searches. If you are not sure about whether your project fits a funder's criteria contact them and ask their view. Some will take telephone enquiries; others increasingly want a brief outline before you prepare a full brief.

The Title
Perhaps understandably, most funding organisations do not fund any aspect of ongoing running costs, preferring to put their money into the specifics of a project (i.e. a set activity planned to be achieved within a specific time frame and with a set purpose that can demonstrate perhaps main outcome and possibly several additional outcomes, which add value). Therefore it is vital to use a title that sums up what you are trying to achieve. This enables your prospective partners and your funders to understand exactly what your project is about i.e. GOAL - Go On-line Automotive Learning.

Be Realistic
Some of the best projects of recent years have been quite small but have had a direct and easily measurable impact on outputs, which can be considered a success.
One of the most vital things is to illustrate clearly that you are addressing a proven need and that your aims and objectives are clear and realistic. Any project that is seen to be achievable, useful and focussed indicates to funders that it has been well-planned and organised.

Stay Focused
In this case it means that you should maintain a level of vigilance regarding the project plan and you original aims and objectives. This will not guarantee success but it can substantially increase your chances of success. Be absolutely sure that you and your colleagues focussed on your goals, especially:
··why your project is important
··how you will specifically use project funding to achieve your aims

It is almost always a good idea to appoint someone as project manager, their role will be to co-ordinate the project and ensure that everyone knows what they are supposed to be doing and when. Also make sure you and your colleagues
··are clear as to their role within the project
··are clear as to who is co-ordinating the project and the funding applications
··are aware that if certain tasks need to be delegated, this is the project manager's responsibility. Be certain this is done before the planning process gets underway, as this could slow things down and waste time.

Benefits

Remember that whoever is funding the project will be more interested in who will benefit from your project than your needs or those of the consortium. Demonstrating these benefits is vital, and can be done in a variety of ways:

··Be specific as to the benefits of the project avoiding vague statements
··Be as specific as possible about why your project is needed at this time.
··Be as honest and open as possible, no funder likes surprises
··Explain – use plain language to explain who will benefit from your project and how
··Use statistics carefully, surveys, census, council records or any statistics in your area should be used sparingly to and only to help prove your project is needed.

N.B. If you have what you think is '**A good idea'** complete the following exercise
Exercise 1: Please complete 1 line entries under the following titles except for Key Activities where you can list up to 4 activities you see as most relevant.
Project/Initiative Title:
Idea:
Realisation:
Object:
Target Group:
Key Success Indicator:
Key Organisations:
Key Activities:
1) _____
2) _____
3) _____
4) _____

Part 2
Project Costs
Work out a breakdown of what the project is likely to cost and be realistic. It is a common fallacy that by asking for less you have a better chance of success. However, if the budget does not match the aims, it just looks poorly costed. Equally, do not inflate the budget artificially. Experienced bid assessors can usually spot inflated budgets. It is always a good idea to fully involve any financial officer your organisation may have, if you do not have one it is good idea to seek financial advice on, for example, allowances for inflation etc.

Evaluation & Monitoring
Before any funding organisation will allocate funds to your project they will have to reassure themselves beyond reasonable doubt that you can manage what you have set out in your application. Primarily this means funds and people. There will normally be an established and documented reporting process for the applicant to comply with. However, unless you have an effective system of reporting/monitoring what is happening on a day to day basis and evaluating progress and events on a more formalised basis, you will not have the evidence to prove you are complying with this.
One way of achieving this is to set out clearly how the project will be monitored and evaluated in the project application and then ensuring you implement this in full. For example you could describe in detail how the project will be evaluated when it comes to an end. You could also set out in the application how you are going to evidence what you have accomplished i.e. through case studies, newsletters etc.

Exit Strategy
An exit strategy is something many who apply for funding put less emphasis on than for example how success will be evidenced. This is a common mistake and the presence of even an outline exit strategy is essential in most funding applications. It would however; be better to at least include an outline of an exit strategy which spells out various scenarios based on levels of success and an expectation of how the project activities can be continued after the initial funding period.

Plan Ahead!
'Always easier said than done', as some funders are not that visible when requesting submissions. Spotting possible funding streams as early as possible is vital to avoid a reduction in the time for writing an

application. If you can allow yourself plenty of time, be careful that this does not slip down the list of priorities. Shoddily researched or quickly written applications are rarely successful and can reflect badly on the institution which submitted them. One good way of reminding yourself of deadlines is to set up reminders on you diary system. Also involve others who will be expected to contribute usefully to the application.

Their involvement will usually result in a more rounded application but also they will want to know what is going on and may therefore drive the process. If you are planning to apply for a large sum of money allow a good long lead time if possible even as long as 6-9 months. What if you only get part of the funds bid for? Your application as with your exit strategy should be structured to take account of this. What for example is the key part of the project and what parts of it fall into the nice to have category.

Identifying the Right Funding Agency
Identifying the most appropriate funders for your organisation and project can be the most important stage in the application process. Thorough research into what the funder is trying to stimulate is essential to avoid time wasted applying to funders who may not even have an interest in your project or area. In other words try to match your project idea against the aspirations of the funding agency rather than re-write it in order to cram it into criteria which are not appropriate.

Do You Apply To One Or More Funders For A Single Project?
Some funding agencies like to fund the project as a whole, some like to add value to the funds of others. It is worth bearing in mind that you might not be successful, so it's important to have other potential funders to apply to. Key to this is up-to-date information, as funding have been known to change/amend guidelines and objectives up to 3 times a year.

Part 3
Follow the Guidelines
Once you identified the funding agency which is your primary target, read the funding stream guidelines more than once. Make sure you are eligible and meet all requirements e.g.
·· Is your group/organisation eligible?
·· Can the funds be used for your project?
·· Is there a list of exclusions?
·· Do you have to be a registered charity?

It is always a good idea to get at least two people to read the funding guidelines and then compare notes. This simple but time consuming method will not only ensure that your organisation is eligible, but allow you to keep the funder's objectives at the forefront of application. One thing that some applicants never do is talk to the funding agency to discuss their application or ask questions. This is a simple and quick way of for example excluding the possibility of submitting an application for an activity which has already been funded. However, if you are going to talk to the funding agency make sure you are prepared to answer any questions you think they may have.

Selling Your Project
If you project idea lacks selling points is it the right one? After all trying to sell the idea of your project is an opportunity to blow our own trumpet so selling points are absolutely key things.
As an exercise try to write down at least three selling points under each of the following headings for your favourite project idea:
·· As a Learning provider, this project / service meets the following need(s):
·· The needs we meet are particularly important because:
·· The following shows that our organisation's service / projects are effective:
·· We are different or unique because:
·· Our other strengths are:
·· If this project were not to happen or our service didn't exist then:

Funding agencies usually prefer to support successes rather than failures. Therefore, if you have a track record of success? Why not share it with the funder in factual terms of course, but do not try to oversell. For example you could list your three greatest successes over perhaps the last three to five years.

Part 4

The Application

Now that you have done all the preliminary work and you are certain you can apply turn your attention to the funding agencies application form or you letter of application. When completing the form or letter ensure you use key 'buzzwords' from the guidelines in the application, where you can, be positive and use confident action oriented words like: 'increase', 'maximise', 'save', 'assist', 'decrease' and avoid using words like:' would', 'could', 'should' and 'may'. Keep your application focussed, by being very clear about the vision, aims and objectives and keep what you say clear, concise and above all convincing.

Even when a funding agency has no standard application form and requests a letter of application, they will usually have guidelines you need to follow.

··Always take the time to write a personal letter to each funder

··Address the letter to the correct contact

··Send your letter on headed paper

··Your letter should be of medium length perhaps a maximum of 2 sides of A4

··Use factual information, backed up with the sparing use of statistics.

··Make copies of the application form use these to draft your answers. This way, the final version types version will be perfect

··Answer all questions asked, never leave a question blank question write N/A if the question does not apply to your organisation

A Suggested Structure If the funder does not give you specific guidelines as to what to include in your letter, maybe the following list will be of some help:

··Project title;

··Project summary; major aims and objectives

··Introduction: who you are (a brief history of your group or organisation);

··Why your project is needed

··Project description – including why it's important and how it will directly benefit users, how it will be run, how it will be monitored and evaluated, and the results you expect to achieve.

··Summary of project activities to capture the reader's attention; include...

o What you will do;

o How you will do it;

o How you will know if you are successful;

o The level of funds you need to do it

··How you will get all the money needed;

··The actual request (a concise statement of exactly what you want from them)

··Why the funder might be interested, (in advertising terms this is called the hook)

··Exit strategy for the future, if not a one off project with a clear end and result.

··Evaluation and reporting

··Be sure to finish the letter with your contact information

Documents

Remember to send all supporting documentation requested. Funding applications can be immediately rejected if supporting documents are missing or incomplete. If sending a copy of your annual accounts or an outline of your project budget make sure they are signed and dated. Some funders may ask for your most recent bank statement, and this must be the original. Always make sure to affix correct postage if you are posting the application.

Checking

Once you have completed the first draft get someone to review the document and see if in their view you have met the funder's priorities and criteria? If in their view you have, review the draft and see if there is anything you can add or take away. If in their view you haven't then maybe contacting the funder for clarification might help.

Among other things check whether you have described the project in clear language that will be meaningful to someone not directly involved? Do not assume that because it seems obvious to you what you are trying to achieve that it will make the same sense to somebody else. Get someone else to read it for sense.

Have you described again in clear language how the project will be managed and provided details of the management structure, including respective roles of the project team, monitoring and evaluation roles etc.?

Have you a clear written action plan that states:
- Precisely actions you are going to take?
- When these will happen and for how long they will last?
- The order in which these actions need to take place including any interdependencies or parallel activities?
- Short-term outcomes
- Long-term outcomes or consequences?
- The strategy to be adopted by the project team and/or any steering group?
- How you will know you have been successful?

In addition:
- Have you demonstrated that your organisation has the ability and experience to complete the project? You can of course include evidence of previous experience here.
- Does your clearly laid out financial plan match your project activity plan?
- Have you set out detailed costings for the project under the required subheadings (i.e. Capital equipment, staff development (CPD), support, consumables etc.)?
- Does this include project lead in time?
- Are you sure you have listed all the core costs if they are going to be a contribution in kind?
- Does your exit strategy consider how the project will be embedded into mainstream activities and what resources, financial or otherwise, will be required?
- Have you ensured that the appropriate systems will be in place to account for the funds?
- Do you have a clear idea from the draft whether your organisation has the key policies required by the funder, such as an Equal Opportunity Policy in place, if so how have you evidenced this?
- Have you demonstrated there is a need for the project?
- Have you outlined a structured dissemination strategy showing how the project outcomes will be communicated to, and impact upon, other providers?
- Does your bid clearly match the criteria, priorities and requirements of the funder?
- Has someone else proof read it for language and sense?

Avoid Using Jargon, Assume Nothing
Most bid applications are necessarily read by people who have no idea what you organisation does or how it does it. So make it sound attractive but not complicated by using plain language and keeping your answers concise. Never use acronyms and abbreviations without explaining them. Assume that the funder has no prior knowledge of your group, organisation or local area. What may be obvious to you may not be obvious to the person assessing your application.

Remember You Are The Applicant So Do As You Are Told
Be sure to follow the instructions of the funding agency carefully and give them exactly what they want. If the form states that you should only type within the boxes or that they don't want faxed copies, don't try to be clever do what they ask! Get someone not associated with the project to read the application or letter when it's finished. This will give you a good idea of how it reads. Do not handwrite your application, even if the rules allow it and you think your hand writing is very neat. It will always look more professional when neatly typed.

Unsuccessful Funding Bids
These can be hard to accept and very disappointing, especially after all the work put into them. If you are unsuccessful, contact the funder for feedback if none is sent with the notification to set your mind at rest and to help you with your next application you could learn valuable lessons. We have to accept; however, that sometimes, it is simply too many applications for too little money.