10 Things Every PI Should Consider When Planning an International Project

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1. What types of activities are covered by the project?

MIT engages in numerous international projects – more than 300 at last count. Some activities recur in different forms in many of our international agreements.

These include:

- Institution building and institutional change
- Research
- Innovation and entrepreneurship
- Education and curriculum development
- Assistance with faculty recruitment and training
- Personnel exchange

Depending on the activities, some projects may require greater support and a more extensive approval process.

The ICC works to ensure that MIT can support and fulfill each of the commitments in our international agreements. Consider early in your planning what activities will occur during the course of the project, what value the activities bring to the MIT community, and what lessons can be learned from prior projects.

The ICC can help you:

- **Build a team.** A more complex project will require consultation with multiple administrative offices. The ICC will begin communicating with appropriate stakeholders, including the IAC, immediately after hearing from you.

- **Get connected.** It is important that appropriate people in MIT's administrative offices are engaged throughout the process – from the early stages of assembling your proposal to the point of negotiating the agreement.

- **Be informed.** The ICC will inform you of potentially similar projects, explore ways to maximize impact and connect you to resources that might be valuable in your planning.

2. Who are the external stakeholders?

Sponsors of international projects may take many forms, including governments, foundations, state-owned or independent corporations, or individuals. As with domestic projects, many major international engagements have a combination of sponsors.

For international projects, it is particularly important to understand the relationship between MIT and the sponsor(s), and any constraints that may impact your activities as a result of their status.

The ICC can help you:

- **Identify key stakeholders.** We will work with you to identify decision makers, negotiators, funders, and other relevant parties.

- **Determine necessary approvals.** Depending on the type of sponsor and its structure, we will help determine requirements needed to implement your project.

- **Facilitate the process.** To expedite negotiation, we will connect the appropriate representatives from MIT with their sponsor counterparts early in the process.

- **Raise questions.** With our involvement, the appropriate groups can perform due diligence on sponsors and begin working through any legal issues or challenges related to payment and taxes.

3. Have you connected with the appropriate people at MIT?

International engagements require input from administrators in multiple offices to negotiate and implement.

Large projects, known as international engagements, include one or more of the following characteristics:

- Multiple activities

- Multiple departments/disciplines

- Significant funding

- Governance structures, such as a board of directors, steering committee, or a scientific advisory board

- Research proposal selection

- Collaborations with the sponsor's Principal Investigators

- Foreign currency payments

- Long-term plan (3-10 years)

They also need to be approved by the appropriate dean or department head and filtered through the International Advisory Committee (IAC). Contact one of the IAC co-chairs with details of the project to get on the agenda of the IAC's monthly meetings.

The ICC can help you:

- **Connect and consult.** The ICC will help coordinate the activities of multiple offices related to project development, approval, and implementation.

- **Move forward.** The ICC will connect you with a team from relevant offices that will work with you to resolve questions, draft an agreement, and advance negotiations.

Please contact the ICC for assistance.

4. What financial and legal issues need to be considered?

International projects bring multiple financial and legal considerations. A sponsor might not be aware of tax codes or laws that impact payment of overhead, or may want to pay with non-U.S. currency, which can create a significant administrative burden for your project or department. The ICC has experience managing issues like these so that project negotiation and implementation can proceed smoothly.

The ICC can help you:

- **Ask the right questions.** Will sponsor funds be taxed upon leaving the country? What is the sponsor's policy on overhead? Do they have policies on what costs are allowable?

- **Analyze and get advice.** MIT's tax and legal specialists will review the specifics of your project and determine what laws or tax codes apply for that type of sponsor or that particular country. In some cases, MIT may hire an outside expert for further assistance.

5. How do you determine your budget?

It is important to understand the full financial picture of a project -- the funds needed both to support the activity and to assure that MIT is kept whole.

Principal Investigators often find that they are asked to put a dollar value on a project before it is well defined and costs fully understood. For major international engagements, a best practice is to build in a project definition period of six months or so for both MIT and the sponsor to assess priorities, feasibility and costs.

The ICC can help you:

- **Evaluate the costs.** Before providing an estimated project total, consult with the ICC along with the appropriate administrator in your department regarding the specifics of the statement of work so all costs can be identified and factored into the total. Additional taxes or legal fees must also be considered.

- **Understand the details.** The overhead rate for nonNresearch activities, contributions to the endowment, and other potential MIT internal costs are specific to each project. We will work with you to determine these costs as the project is outlined.

Please contact the ICC for assistance.

6. Will project personnel spend time abroad?

Clear communication with sponsors is essential, particularly with regard to faculty time abroad. MIT does not typically approve long-term international stays for faculty due to the resources needed to support such extended absences.

While extended stays are often acceptable for students and staff, they present unique challenges in areas that include taxes and supervision.

Many countries require a visa for U.S. citizens, and most require student visas for studying abroad. If foreign national students or postdocs are travelling to another country, they may have visa requirements that U.S. citizens do not. MIT does not have an office that handles outgoing visas for MIT personnel. In the future, we plan to contract with an outside vendor who can provide fast and economical support for obtaining visas.

The ICC can help you:

- **Clarify expectations.** It is important that, early in the process, you discuss expectations for faculty residency with your sponsor. This requires communicating MIT's limitations on how much time faculty can spend abroad.

- **Determine tax implications.** Our goal is to identify and resolve tax-related questions before an agreement is signed. Tax laws vary by country and MIT personnel working outside the U.S. may be subject to income tax in that country, as well as the U.S. More broadly, MIT may create a permanent establishment (PE) in another country by performing some services, and as a result might have to pay taxes on contract funds. Note that work in country can be cumulative across all MIT departments, not just the project under discussions. In general, longer stays will mean a higher tax risk.

- **Manage people abroad.**

7. Will your project bring visitors to MIT?

It is important to determine whether your project will bring international visitors to MIT, how many will come, and how long they will stay.

Department administrators provide asstance with such visits in coordination with the International Scholars Office (ISchO) and the International Students Office (ISO). They will need advance notice to process visas and to assess MIT's capacity to absorb visitors based on available lab space, offices, and housing.

The ICC can help you:

- **Plan and manage visits.** Sponsor visits are often the starting points for future international projects and lay the groundwork for successful negotiations. As discussions advance, it may be necessary to clarify expectations for the length and frequency of visits from sponsor personnel and include those in the terms of the agreement.

- **Prepare for arrival.** International visitors require significant coordination among the ISchO, ISO, and departmental administrators. It is essential to provide adequate lead time for preparation. Some factors to consider include:

  o Where will they be physically located and is there sufficient space?

  o What visas and approvals are needed?

  o Who will be monitoring their activities?

  o Will visitors be taking classes, teaching, or conducting research?

  o Will they receive payment or stipend and will there be tax implications?

  o What kind of access will they have to information and facilities?

  o Are there training requirements?

  o Are there potential export issues?

  o Have registration fees or visiting students been budgeted?

  o Who is responsible for the visitor's health insurance?

  o Are sponsors and visitors aware of the necessary IPIA forms?

For additional information, speak with your dean's office, the ISchO, or the ISO.

8. Is your project affected by export control?

Export controls are federal regulations that restrict access to and the flow of certain materials, devices, data, and technical information to entities outside the U.S. and to foreign nationals inside the U.S.

Export control issues may also affect international travel. MIT complies fully with all U.S. export control laws and regulations—noncompliance can have serious consequences on an individual and institutional level.

The ICC can help you:

- **Stay in compliance.** Helpful information on export controls and how to comply with them is available on OSP's website. Different regulations will apply depending on the technology and the destination.

- **Review your project**. Any project with international components should be reviewed by MIT's Export Control Officer. We will initiate this process for every proposal where the Principal Investigator indicates information or materials will be shipped abroad.

If you have questions or would like to request a review, please contact Janet Johnston, Export Control Officer, Office of Sponsored Programs.

9. What are the potential health and safety concerns?

You should become familiar with the requirements and risks of international travel, and consider whether your planned activity might present any safety concerns, especially for students. It is also important to consider potential issues related to social, cultural or political conditions.

The ICC can help you:

- **Be prepared.** Anyone planning a trip is advised to check the U.S. State Department (DoS) website, for travel warnings, notifications, and consular information sheets. The DoS website also has useful information about medical concerns, visas, personal safety, local customs, and other issues.

- **Be in the know.** MIT has a Travel Risk Policy to support well-informed travel decisions. The guidelines describe levels of travel warnings, definitions of MIT travel, and policies that apply to such travel.

- **Stay healthy.** MIT Medical's Travel Clinic should be your first stop to ensure a safe and healthy trip for students, faculty, and staff. Schedule an appointment early, ideally eight weeks prior to departure. MIT's Medical Center also offers a Medical & Health Needs Assessment for International Programs (PDF) that identifies issues to consider.

- **Learn about benefits.** MIT's Business Travel Accident Insurance policy provides benefits for MIT faculty, staff, and students traveling domestically and abroad on MIT business. Please review the MIT Business Travel Accident Policy and consult the MIT Insurance Office for additional information.

- **Manage an emergency.** MIT has contracted with the travel assistance company International SOS (ISOS) to provide emergency medical and security evacuation services to faculty, staff, and students traveling on MIT business. Pre-registration with ISOS is highly encouraged. It is important to note that ISOS does not take the place of health insurance.

10. When can collaborators announce the project?

MIT is careful about the public use of its name by others. Detailed policies are in place in this regard. All such uses require prior approval by the Technology Licensing Office (TLO). In general, announcements about any project take place only after an agreement is in place and the text must be vetted in advance by MIT.

International collaborators often ask MIT or Principal Investigators (PIs) to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to memorialize discussions about a potential collaboration. *MIT generally doesn't negotiate or sign MOUs or other documents simply stating that discussions are taking place, preferring to work on and document the actual scope and terms of projects.*

The ICC can help you:

- **Follow policy.** The ICC will see that the agreement includes the terms necessary to ensure that the sponsor is bound by MIT policy. Information about MIT's Use of Name policy is available here or by email.

- **Assess an MOU.** The ICC will help determine whether an MOU makes sense for your project. Questions to consider include: What commitments are being made in the MOU? What benefit is there to MIT from signing?

Contact us at:
internationalhelp@mit.edu