

Evaluation of the Orange Knowledge Programme

Policy brief on main outcomes of evaluating the 6-year MFA-funded education support programme.

4 December 2025

Key messages

- OKP was highly relevant to Dutch and partner-country priorities and broadly effective in building individual and institutional capacity, with only moderate prospects for sustainability;
- Its main strengths were demand-driven design, long-term partnerships and diplomatic value, linking practical, labour-market-oriented training to institutional change;
- Main limitations were fragmented portfolios, short trainings and weak integration between instruments, which made systemic impact uneven and highly context-dependent;
- For potential future Dutch education and skills cooperation, a crucial recommendation is to move toward country-led, system-oriented skills partnerships that integrate HE–TVET, scholarships and institutional projects, supported by simple but robust monitoring, active alumni and strong embassy engagement.

Background

The Orange Knowledge Programme (OKP) was **launched by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)** as a successor to the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP) and the Netherlands Initiative for Capacity Building in Higher Education (NICHE). Implementation ran from 2018 to 2024 under the **coordination of Nuffic**. With a programme envelope of roughly €310 million, funded jointly by the MFA's Social Development Department (DSO, education team) and the Food and Nutrition Security (FNS) division within the Inclusive Green Growth (IGG) department, OKP represented a substantial share of Dutch development spending for education and capacity building. The programme operated in **55 countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America**.

OKP's instrument mix comprised **Institutional Collaboration Projects (ICPs)**, **group training** (Tailor-Made Training—TMT/TMT+—and refresher courses), **individual scholarships, and alumni activities**. Instruments were deployed through a differentiated A/B/C country categorisation, each category with its own selection of instruments offered through competitive calls encouraging partnerships between Dutch institutions and counterparts in partner countries (including government, civil society and—where relevant—the private sector). Cross-cutting priorities were mainstreamed throughout: gender equality and social inclusion; labour-market alignment and employability; institutional governance and quality assurance; environmental sustainability (including climate resilience where sector-relevant); and digitalisation and knowledge exchange.

The evaluation was commissioned to inform future education and capacity-building instruments and generate lessons learned on programme components that are also part of other MFA policies and programmes. Examples are the use of alumni, diplomatic capital, effective partnerships with partner countries and contributions to thematic priority sectors with Dutch expertise.

Evaluation approach and methodology

The evaluation approach included both portfolio and intervention level (country and sectoral) data to cover the research questions on relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and gender equality. A sample of twelve countries maximised variation in context, priority themes, instrument mix and data richness. The four case-study countries further selected for field visits (Colombia, Ethiopia,

Jordan, Vietnam) combined the different thematic foci and OKP instruments and a mix of fragile and stable contexts. Key Informant Interviews were conducted at the portfolio and country level. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to understand thematic coherence, institutional transformation, and perceived outcomes of OKP interventions. Participants included rightsholders and participants in project activities (i.e. lecturers, students, stakeholders) and recipients of scholarships. Data analysis included triangulation to compare data from primary and secondary resources, as well as combining internal and external sources. For the cases, contribution analysis was applied to test contribution claims. This policy brief describes the key findings and recommendations of the evaluation, all of which are presented in more detail in the main report.

Main findings, lessons learned and policy implications

Relevance (high confidence¹)

Overall, OKP design and interventions were aligned with the objectives of the foreign policy of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Between 2016 and 2022, MFA pursued several key objectives in its education policy for development cooperation.² These objectives were designed to align with broader goals of social progress, economic development, and international stability. The OKP ToC and its assumptions were generally relevant and valid, though their realisation varied by context. Strengthening individual and institutional capacity often improved education systems, but links to wider sectoral or developmental outcomes were weaker where institutional embedding, labour-market alignment, or contextual adaptation were limited. Findings show that OKP has well addressed the needs of demanding organisations and institutions. Demanding organisations were actively involved in the design of the projects, which was particularly strong when partners had been in long-term relationships. Good practices to carry forward include partnerships that foster ongoing interaction between Dutch and local institutions, and where linkages with other national actors created space for continued cooperation beyond individual projects.

Coherence (medium confidence)

All projects were aligned with the strategic priorities of partner countries, such as food security, water management, and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and Rule of Law and Security. Internal coherence was moderate, with synergies materialising in several contexts but often opportunistically rather than through systematic portfolio design. Portfolio coherence depended on how well the different instruments (ICPs, centrally managed TMTs, and scholarships, often implemented by different partners) were integrated. Weak connections, short trainings, and pressures at the project level (e.g., the need to disburse budgets within short timeframes and to comply with rigid performance indicator frameworks) reduced the portfolio's ability to achieve long-term impact and should be avoided in the future. External coherence was strong at the design stage but more uneven in implementation, depending heavily on the Embassies' choice and ability to convene and regularly consult partners.

Effectiveness (medium confidence)

Targets were not clearly formulated, and baseline data were not systematically collected for key components such as scholarships, institutional collaboration projects, and training activities. While numerical achievements were mentioned, they were not consistently tracked or verified. The effectiveness of OKP at the output level was mixed, largely depending on the quality of coordination and local ownership. OKP contributed to intended outcomes at individual and organisational levels, with

¹ High: three or more independent sources, broad country coverage, and solid documentation; Medium: at least two independent sources with gaps in country coverage and documentation; Low: single-source and/or limited corroborating evidence.

² In 2018, the Netherlands selected its Official Development Assistance (ODA) partner countries based on a combination of development needs, Dutch expertise, and thematic priorities. The criteria were more focused on global solidarity and effectiveness than the national-interest-driven approach seen in later years.

evidence of enhanced skills, curriculum reform, and institutional capacity strengthening. Long-term Master's training showed stronger and more sustained effects, while short courses delivered rapid, task-specific results. Sector-wide impacts were limited, with outcomes largely verified at organisational and system-interface levels. Progress is visible on reciprocity/co-creation and blended delivery, with limited movement on co-financing. Alumni systems and private-sector linkage were not consistently demonstrated.

Strengthening linkages between Higher Education (HE) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) can significantly increase the impact of development programs like OKP. Key impact reasons are that theoretical knowledge (HE) with practical skills (TVET) to meet industry needs are combined. It can foster private sector engagement in a future programme. One key lesson learned is that both HE and TVET institutions value the inclusion of more practical components in their curricula, which the OKP has supported. However, fostering closer collaboration between HE institutions, typically more theory-oriented and TVET institutions, focused on practical skills, could lead to more effective and efficient solutions.

Efficiency (high confidence)

Roles were efficiently divided and resources were well managed among OKP partners, and collaboration was generally strong. Yet, operational coordination between different partners active in a country, and with the MFA, was limited. Factors explaining differences in efficiency included fragile contexts, COVID-19, language barriers, and a too detailed M&E framework.

OKP demonstrated flexibility in adapting to local administrative systems and political environments. Projects were tailored to country-specific needs, allowing for responsive adjustments in implementation. For example, in fragile contexts in the Middle East and refugee settings in Africa, OKP adapted delivery models to overcome logistical and bureaucratic hurdles. Especially during the pandemic, OKP adapted by offering online learning platforms like Google Classroom and Zoom, making education accessible in remote areas.

ICP budgets excluded local staff time, while funding of working hours was available for Dutch partners. The establishment of separate project bureaus in universities to manage OKP as an additional funding stream created silos and raised equity concerns. To avoid leaving lower-resourced institutions at a disadvantage, future designs could consider measures such as needs-based subsidies for local staff time.

Sustainability and early signs of impact (medium confidence)

The likelihood that the outcomes will be sustained was found to be moderate. Mechanisms to ensure ongoing benefits exist, but are unevenly applied (financing, alumni, and exit provisions are weakest).

Diplomatic value existed but needed clearer roles and greater acknowledgement. Embassies were a crucial link, connecting the Netherlands with partner countries in terms of diplomacy, trade, and political relations, and OKP gave them a way to sustain programming; TMTs offered soft-power benefits. Alignment with Dutch foreign policy and embassy strategies strengthened design-stage coherence and diplomatic engagement; however, in some contexts, this close alignment constrained local ownership during implementation. The governance setup limited how much Nuffic could steer implementation consistently across instruments and countries. The alumni network remained underutilised.

Long-term relationships, like in a Southeast Asian country, were crucial for trust and impact. OKP emphasised inclusive partnerships between Dutch institutions and local stakeholders, universities, ministries, NGOs, and private sector actors. In the same country, the Climate Proof programme focused on coastal engineering, water management, and climate resilience. It strengthened partnerships between

Dutch and national universities, improved access to international journals, and supported young researchers.

Across stakeholder groups, many respondents expressed regret about the discontinuation of OKP. They valued it as an instrument for political dialogue (Embassies), long-term partnerships and mutual learning (HE/TVET institutions), and reciprocal cultural understanding (participants).

Gender equality and inclusion (medium confidence)

Performance on gender was mixed across countries and interventions. Specific gender-responsive activities/training took place, and efforts were taken to support 50% participation of women. Across the portfolio, 50% of scholarships were awarded to women and 50% to men. However, gender equality was not meaningfully applied to country contexts, and no strong conclusion can be drawn on the extent to which gender and inclusion outcomes have been achieved.

Recommendations

Recommendations are presented in two groups: strategic (policy- and design-related) and operational (implementation-related). The strategic recommendations primarily align with the DAC criteria of sustainability and coherence. Aspects that relate more directly to effectiveness, efficiency and relevance are addressed in the subsequent section on operational recommendations. **Strategic recommendations** include:

1. **Adopt country-led skills partnership frameworks that link Dutch development spending to employer co-financing and sector regulation.** At the policy level, embassies should have a clear mandate, time and appropriate instruments to broker tripartite agreements between government, industry, and education institutions in priority sectors.
2. **Establish an MFA-wide ‘Alumni Diplomacy & Knowledge’ policy line.** This should include a unified alumni database and dedicated activation budgets at mission level.
3. **Make ‘Digital Learning as a Public Good’ a standing development cooperation policy instrument.** Finance interoperable, open digital infrastructure (e.g., open-source learning platforms, shared course repositories, and mutually recognised credential/micro-credential standards) designed to also function in low-connectivity environments. This reflects OKP’s experience that digital and blended delivery improved reach and efficiency but was hampered by weak infrastructure, particularly in rural and fragile contexts and for women and marginalised youth.
4. **Diversify financing models to crowd-in resources.** Projects lasted longer when cash or in-kind co-financing was clearly agreed and tracked. Future calls should make employer or sector co-financing a firm requirement and include it in monitoring from approval through to closure.
5. **Support resource-constrained institutions with targeted capacity and subsidised access:** less-resourced universities and TVETs risk exclusion under strict co-financing rules.
6. **Demand-driven design with embassy-led convening and instrument sequencing at the country level.** Future portfolios should remain demand-driven and give embassies sufficient room and tools to steer country portfolios in line with partner needs and Dutch policy frameworks.
7. **Clarify roles and strengthen governance (MFA–Nuffic–RNE) with documented handovers.** Regular coordination through steering committees, bi-weekly meetings, and shared repositories makes work more efficient and consistent.
8. **Clarify continuation planning at the design stage.** Future portfolio design should make continuation pathways visible at approval (institutional embedding, partnership commitments, budget lines, alumni/refreshers), and embassies should be mandated to convene annual sustainability reviews aligned to project or programme milestones.

9. **In fragile and conflict-affected settings**, programme design and implementation should incorporate a resilience lens—not only governance. This means building institutional and community capacity to adapt to shocks and maintain continuity of learning and services.
10. It is recommended to **conduct a mid-term risk and political economy analysis** during implementation, as country contexts can evolve and become fragile over time.
11. It is recommended to optimise the effectiveness and sustainability of capacity development interventions by **strategically balancing long-term academic training** (e.g., Master's programmes) **with short-term practical training** (e.g., short courses and Tailor-Made Training)

The **operational recommendations** primarily align with the DAC criteria of effectiveness and sustainability, show moderate alignment with efficiency, and have minimal relevance to the criteria of coherence and relevance.

1. **Reinstate light, outcome-level MEL with separate frameworks—education and thematic:** outcomes were under-measured, but this does not require detailed tracking at the highest sector level. Instead, M&E should focus on effects at the level of institutions and graduates, where OKP has the most direct influence.
2. **Rebalance scholarships toward institutional pathways and return/placement.** approve short courses only when they are explicitly linked to ICP/TMT objectives and include a signed return/placement plan.
3. **Continue to support digitalisation and blended approaches where they add value.** Digital delivery improved resilience and cost-effectiveness when LMS, digital content, and trainer coaching were embedded with QA/budgets, rather than improvised (e.g., during COVID-19).
4. **Operationalise cross-cutting priorities with measurable plans and budgets.** Gender, inclusion, youth, and climate were not integrated consistently. Each theme should have one or two specific indicators, dedicated resources, and stronger use of alumni and TMTs to embed these priorities into HR systems, curricula, and quality assurance.
5. **Localise delivery: retain a central strategic core team; expand in-country Nuffic functions.** portfolios benefitted where local representatives animated alumni, coordination and compliance. Delegate these functions to regional/local offices with clear mandates/budgets, keep strategy and quality assurance in The Hague.
6. Design programmes with **modular components** and **contingency plans** to adapt to changing political or bureaucratic contexts. Agility ensures continuity and relevance, especially in fragile or rapidly evolving environments.
7. **Reduce transaction costs: two-stage calls and targeted compliance guidance.** Introducing a two-stage application process (from concept note to full proposal) together with clear and concise compliance guidance lowers entry barriers for applicants.
8. Promote **joint initiatives between HE and TVET institutions** to blend theory and practice. This creates more holistic and employable graduates and bridges the skills gap. Establish structured, incentivised collaboration frameworks between HE and TVET institutions.

Overall, the evaluation shows that OKP generated not only skills and institutional capacity, but also relationships, mutual understanding and diplomatic capital that many stakeholders consider highly valuable. OKP is largely seen as a transformative engine for partnerships, mutual learning and the visibility of Dutch expertise. This track record offers the MFA the opportunity to use education cooperation more strategically in political dialogue with partner countries.