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Institute of Tropical Medicine

**Social, Developmental  
and Professional Impact  
Evaluation of ITM's Edu-  
cational Activities and  
Scholarship Programme**

Executive Summary

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Syspons GmbH  
Prinzenstraße 84  
10969 Berlin

Johanna Renz, Claudia Rojas, Aron Trieb, Justine  
Garrigue, Lennart Raetzell, Olga Almqvist

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## 1. Objective of the evaluation

The Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) commissioned Syspons to conduct a Social, Developmental and Professional Impact Evaluation of ITM's Educational Activities and Scholarship Programme. The evaluation focussed on ITM's Master courses, Short Courses, and Post-Graduate Courses between 2008 and 2019, as well as the respective DGD-funded scholarships. In addition, the PhD programme in the period between 2003 and 2019 was analysed, with a focus on the DGD-funded sandwich programme.

This evaluation was grounded in two rationales: Firstly, ITM's Institutional Policy Plan refers to the intention of conducting a social impact survey to assess impact of educational activities. Secondly, the Framework agreement (FA) between ITM and the Directorate General for Development Cooperation (DGD) obliges ITM to conduct a mid-term evaluation of its multi-year programme for which the focus can be freely chosen in dialogue with the donor. Thus, the evaluation served a formative as well as a summative purpose. Regarding the former, the evaluation's objective was to generate insights into the social, developmental, and professional impact of ITM's educational and scholarship activities on alumni competencies, capacities, and networks. It also aimed to help ITM gain an understanding of the mechanisms and conditions under which impact occurs. This led to the development of recommendations on which ITM can base potential adjustments to its policy strategies and practices and to inform a new DGD funded five-year programme. Furthermore, the evaluation served as a starting block for a longitudinal survey for which a concept should be developed based upon the impact evaluation's results. Concerning the summative objective, the evaluation aimed to contribute to accountability towards DGD and to gain insights in student and alumni profiles for strategic decision-making purposes. In the evaluation, the OECD-DAC criteria relevance, effectiveness, impact, and coherence guided and structured the evaluation questions.

## 2. Employed evaluation design

The design for this evaluation was based on the combination of a contribution analysis, a stratified cohort, and a counterfactual approach. The contribution analysis was used to investigate the extent to which the observed (positive or negative) effects can be attributed to ITM's educational activities and scholarship programme and the extent to which alternative explanatory patterns can be identified. For the stratified cohort, data was collected from different cohorts to compare cohorts who graduated more recently to those whose graduation data was longer ago. In this way, long-term changes, for example on career development, could be assessed. The counterfactual approach was applied to observe the development of individuals who attended ITM or those who did not. For the quantitative data collection, an online surveys of current PhD students, alumni, and a comparison group was conducted. For the qualitative data collection, four country case studies (Peru, Kenya, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of the Congo) were conducted next to the surveys for an in-depth qualitative analysis of ITM's educational activities and scholarship programme. The data was collected and analysed to address evaluation questions along the criteria relevance, effectiveness and impact, as well as coherence.

## 3. Key Findings and Conclusions

### *Relevance*

**ITM's educational activities are relevant**, as students learn relevant and useful skills for their professional practice to add value in the fields of public health and tropical medicine. Specifically, ITM enables students by conveying soft skills and practical skills, which are needed by student and employers in the fields of public health and tropical medicine. Through the wide range of courses offered at ITM and the modular structure, the educational activities are relevant to different students with different needs. On the level of partner institutions and employers, ITM also supports student mobility and is therefore relevant for partner institutions who need to become more visible in the global public health community.

In addition, the **DGD-funded scholarship was assessed highly relevant and effective**, as it gives students the necessary financial resources to access education and focus fully on their studies. The case studies revealed that many students would not have had alternative sources of funding. Furthermore, the online survey showed that the financial structure of the programme, which incorporates additional costs such as for visa, flights or dependants is mostly appropriate for students' needs and therefore relevant. As a result, many do not have financial problems or concerns during their studies, which allows them to focus on their studies and strengthens the effect of the educational activities. Nevertheless, the evaluation also uncovered that the allowance is not always sufficient, especially to cover research costs during PhD programmes. In this regard, the evaluation results point to a potential area of action, as specified in recommendation 2.

### *Effectiveness and impact*

ITM contributes to **long-lasting connections** between graduates and staff to **strengthen formal and informal networks for lifelong learning, exchange and belonging**. ITM's diverse cohorts, study groups and communities contribute to exchange, which can be maintained over a long time. In addition, students from different cohorts, but the same countries connect to each other. This strengthens an informal alumni network across generations of students, but not necessarily between students of different courses who are at ITM at the same time. Nonetheless, the networks are mostly created and maintained through informal processes, such as joint WhatsApp groups alumni from the same cohort, course or country. Moreover, when multiple graduates work in the same field and in the same country or region, these connections can be used for cross-organisational collaboration. As a result, on an impact level, graduates have the potential to act as agents of change in fields of tropical medicine and public health, but this is dependent on the connections and support that they have from their organisations. Regarding the formal alumni networks, which entail a variety of channels like the alumni platform, the evaluation concludes that it is appreciated and a well-known mechanism, but it is not being used to its full potential yet.

ITM's educational activities are **largely effective in developing soft skills and competencies** among students of all course types. In this regard, three main aspects were identified that support the development of soft skills. First, the interactions between students and staff were identified as a crucial factor. The diverse cohorts and the range of experience of lecturers and staff are valuable factors to ensure the development of soft skills. Second, by conducting their research in their home countries, graduates' ties to their home countries were strengthened, which can be understood as one dimension of soft skills. Moreover, by conducting research activities, certain soft skills, such as presentation skills were strengthened. Nonetheless, next to the conduct of research, the explicit focus on soft skills like soft skills in modules and practical exercises is a vital mechanism to strengthen soft skills. Third, graduates can use their newly acquired skills in combination, re-enforcing each other. In this regard, the evaluation results support the value-driven approach at ITM, according to which soft skills and hard skills are intertwined and mutually support each other.

Furthermore, **ITM graduates use their acquired competencies in their work and add value to their work environment**. The graduates mostly pass on their knowledge to their colleagues and implement changes, so that the effect of ITM extends to the organisations at which graduates work. However, these changes mostly occur at lower organisational levels, such as introducing new guidelines or processes at team- or departmental levels. To achieve changes at higher organisational levels, many graduates face challenges within their work environment, such as the confinement of their particular positions or organisational inertia, where colleagues or supervisors are not willing to implement changes or new approaches introduced by the graduates. Nonetheless, the evaluation has also found that when multiple graduates work at the same institution, they can leverage their skills and contribute to organisational change, leading to impacts. The exchange among students and staff contributes to graduates adding value in their professional practice and interactions. Specifically, this is facilitated by the close academic support and high levels of expertise of lecturers. The evaluation concludes that the long-lasting support of ITM staff also supports the use of knowledge by graduates. Furthermore, the diverse experience of students and lecturers is crucial for knowledge exchange and gaining insights into different

health systems and practices. Next to the interactions between staff and students, conducting research at home contributes to value addition to some extent. Specifically, because students conduct research in their home countries, they tend to work in their home countries afterwards and can therefore add value in their local contexts. In addition, the practical, hands-on orientation of ITM's education is crucial to ensure that thematic, methodological and ethical competencies can be used in the professional environment.

Ultimately, ITM aims for its graduates to be regarded as competent actors and valuable assets by and to the scientific and public health community. However, ITM **graduates are only viewed as valuable assets to some extent**. Specifically, the analysis of ITM's effectiveness and relevance has shown that ITM graduates are generally seen as valuable assets by their employers. Moreover, graduates progress in their careers graduating from ITM and can become valuable assets in the public health community, which is illustrated by the fact that they get higher positions, some in influential places, such as ministries or international organisations. Nevertheless, ITM is not consistently widely known in the scientific communities in some countries, meaning that ITM graduates do not benefit from a widely known reputation.

Overall, the analysis has shown that one of the added values of ITM is its diverse cohort and the high quality of its student profiles, which are essential for knowledge exchange and learning. This is achieved through a **smooth and fair process**, which leads to select a highly qualified, yet diverse cohort. Nonetheless, the evaluation has also found that no concrete mechanism is set up in the application process to account for the socio-economic background of the applicants, except for their countries of origin. This could be an important factor in the future, particularly in the light of the global Agenda 2030, which emphasises "Leaving No One Behind". As outlined above, the evaluation has found, however, that once selected, the scholarships and educational activities are very effective in taking into account the financial needs of the students. In addition, once selected, students receive high levels of academic and social support, thus ensuring that all students feel welcome and supported at ITM. Therefore, after the selection process, the scholarships provide equitable access to education.

### Coherence

By contributing to health worldwide through education, ITM furthermore contributes to DGD's overarching goals of health and higher education. Thus, on a thematic level, ITM is **internally coherent with DGD**, which is the main funding body of the scholarship programme. Regarding the geographical focus, the internal coherence has been achieved to some extent, as DGD-funded scholarships are mostly awarded to students from DGD priority countries. Nonetheless, the evaluation finds a discrepancy between ITM's aim to foster student interaction in diverse cohorts, which are key for the quality of the education and the development of competencies, and DGD's aim to focus its activities on priority countries. Regarding the external coherence, the evaluation analysed the extent to which ITM's scholarship programme is complementary with the similar organisations VLIR, ARES and the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in the Netherlands. VLIR, ARES and KIT strive towards contributing to sustainable development through higher education. To work on these joint objectives and achieve synergies, they use effective coordination mechanisms, namely the DGD framework agreements for the coordination with VLIR and ARES and the joint membership in the tropEd Network. Furthermore, through the comparison to these three institutions, the evaluation team could further confirm unique and valuable factors identified above, namely ITM's thematic expertise, its geographic and gender diversity, and its secure funding situation, which allows to build long-lasting connections.

## 4. Recommendations

Based on the findings, areas for improvement were identified, as well as areas, where existing practices should be maintained or strengthened.

Recommendations for DGD  
and ITM

- The DGD-funded scholarship programme is highly relevant and effective, as it gives students the necessary financial resources to access education and focus fully on their studies.

**DGD should continue funding the diverse range of educational activities at ITM through its scholarship programme**
- The financial support is mostly adequate in duration, amount and scope; nonetheless, the allowance should be reviewed to ensure that the research costs during the PhD can be covered.

**DGD and ITM should maintain the financing structure of the scholarship programme, which considers visa costs, flight costs, as well as a small allowance for dependents, but review the research allowance.**
- An added value of ITM is its diverse cohort and the high quality of its student profiles, which are essential for knowledge exchange and learning

**DGD should continue funding scholarship. recipients from a range of countries, as the diversity in cohorts is a crucial factor to facilitate capacity development**

Recommendations for ITM

- ITM's range of educational activities meets the needs of different students or of students in different phases of their lives.

**ITM should maintain its diverse range of courses offered, which combines Short Courses, Master courses, post-graduate certificate courses and PhDs, as well as the modular structure within the courses.**
- The close support provided to students at ITM is one of the very effective and distinguishing features of ITM. It is crucial for the learning experience at ITM and for the long-term connections of students with ITM

**In its educational activities and scholarship programme, ITM should continue its emphasis on close academic and social support.**
- ITM's educational activities are largely effective in developing skills and competencies among students. ITM graduates can use their thematic, methodological and ethical competencies, and soft skills to add value in their work environment.

**ITM's emphasis on values, critical thinking and soft skills should be maintained and strengthened in its educational environment.**
- Students benefit from the wealth of knowledge and experience of ITM staff. The diversity of staff, in terms of professional and geographic diversity of lecturers contributes to acquisition of knowledge.

**ITM should strengthen the diversity of lecturers and staff.**
- Overall, the application is fair and selects appropriate candidates for the studies. ITM could further contribute to the Leave no one Behind Agenda by strengthening the access of disadvantaged groups.

**ITM should maintain its selection process overall but consider integrating the Leave no one Behind agenda.**
- To fully benefit from the wealth of courses offered, ITM should foster interaction between courses. This could facilitate cross-cultural learning and exchange.

**ITM should create more joint activities between courses, especially between the Post-Graduate Certificate courses and other courses.**
- Graduates are well connected, but the formal alumni network is not often used by the graduates. In its sustained efforts to develop its alumni strategy, ITM puts an emphasis on leveraging the network for impact, meaning that connections are created and maintained between students at regional, national or local levels for professional exchange and aim for organisational changes at higher organisational levels.

**To leverage its alumni network for impact, ITM should further develop its alumni strategies and activities.**



SYS  
PONS

Syspons GmbH  
Prinzenstraße 84  
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Garrigue, Lennart Raetzell

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