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Identifying the Orange Experience

A building block in contributing to economic development in Emerging countries

With the rise of economic, technological and labour market changes, organisations – particularly those in emerging countries – face more daunting challenges in finding employees with suitable skills sets for open positions (United Nations, 2015). A skills gap is universally recognized as one of the causes of the inability of the labour market to meet particular organizational needs (Malik & Venkatraman, 2017). Skills gap is in turn an established cause of increased inequalities, frustrating economic prosperity and growth. To assist emerging countries in reaching their sustainable development, Nuffic – the Dutch expertise centre for internationalisation of education – has been investing in improving the knowledge and skills of students from emerging countries. One of their capacity development programmes – The Orange Knowledge Programme – provides Dutch education programmes to mid-career professionals from emerging countries, with the ultimate goal of increasing their job opportunities. A relevant question then rises as to whether studying in the Netherlands contributes to better job opportunities and inclusive economic development of emerging countries. To answer this question, DECP started a collaboration with a team of Learning & Development experts of the School of

Business and Economics of Maastricht University. The team of experts subsequently gained insights in the added value and challenges related to studying in Dutch higher education. They ultimately highlight promising strategies to further improve education experiences of international students.

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Comprehensive approach

During the period of April – June 2019, a team of Learning & Development (L&D) experts sought to map the experiences of international students – with a particular focus on students from emerging countries – living and studying in the Netherlands as well the added value they perceived to get of such an experience. This consultancy project entails a comprehensive exploratory analysis as it combines academic literature with qualitative and quantitative data. More specifically, the study surveys education experiences across all dimensions – from current international students studying in the Netherlands to international alumni in addition to Dutch education experts.

Four key themes

As a result, Maastricht University's L&D experts team highlighted four promising key themes relevant to international student's experiences in the Netherlands: the origin of a student, the educational context of an international exchange programme, the connectivity of learning, and the unique characteristics of the students granted with the Orange Knowledge Programme (OKP) scholarship.

International student's origin

The origin of a student plays an important role for intercultural learning to occur during an international exchange programme. In fact, the differences a student can encounter between his or her own culture and that of the host country can influence the student's experience abroad. The findings of the L&D experts allowed them to identify, in the context of international exchange and intercultural learning, the unique and distinct character of Africa as a continent, its culture and inhabitants in comparison to the Netherlands. Accordingly, the cultural differences to consider that the L&D experts identified comprise collectivism in society, time preference, ways of socially addressing people, and power distance perceptions. Power distance, in particular, can affect the societal outcomes of an international exchange programme. It should therefore be taken into account that the knowledge and skills learnt within low power distance countries may take a considerably long time to implement within high power distance countries upon the students' return to their home countries.

High quality education

International students identified the high quality of education in the Netherlands as one of the main motivators for studying in Dutch higher education institutions. Besides, and while specific knowledge in critical fields such as water management is not available in international students'

universities home countries of the respondents' origin, Dutch universities are well-known to possess such forefront knowledge and expertise in the fields in question. As for the teaching approach, international students highlighted the benefits of the more practical teaching in place in the Dutch universities. Adding to this, lower power distance between students and teachers acted as an enabler for active learning, which in turn allows students to effectively accommodate theory and practise.

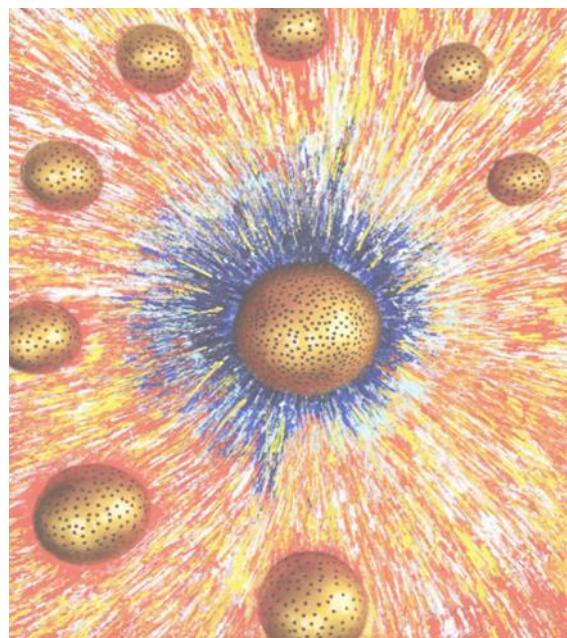


Image 1: Art work created by African – Ghanaian contemporary artist Bari Cobbina, who is also master's student Architecture at Delft University

Learning is about connecting

An educational institute and its staff can also stimulate a lasting learning experience through the establishment of a strong alumni network. Instructors as well as faculty staff are an integral part of the learning sphere. They can thus considerably contribute to the outcomes and experience of international students during and after their studies. As such, a strong network of alumni is a powerful tool in regards to solving developmental issues and reaching United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, given the complex and interrelated nature of Developmental issues,

addressing such issues requires an interdisciplinary approach, of which Alumni Networks are found to be facilitators.

The unique character of OKP students

Finally, the results of the consultancy project showed that the students participating in the OKP were generally older compared to other international students. In addition, OKP students showed a clear purpose for acquiring and being committed to transferring the necessary and newly acquired knowledge as well as skills back into the OKP students' home countries. This observation can be explained by the requirements of the OKP. In fact, the scholarship programme is intended to mid-career professionals who are also required to have several years of work experience and to be employed by a public organisation.

There is a side note to be made about the position of students participating in the Orange Knowledge Programme. Students who participate in the programme might be able to do so due to an already privileged societal position. Therefore, these students might already have the opportunity and access to better jobs and developmental opportunities. Such a situation favouring the access of privileged students to exclusive development opportunities will also hinder the development of potential participants who are in a less favourable position. Herein resides a challenge for DECP and its partner organisations. Both should strive to transfer the beneficial aspects associated with studying in the Netherlands to individuals in emerging countries who do not have the opportunity to participate in an international exchange programme. By sharing these values associated with Dutch education, DECP and its partners leverage and enlarge the effect of international exchange and its positive impact on developing countries.

How to upscale advantages in emerging countries?

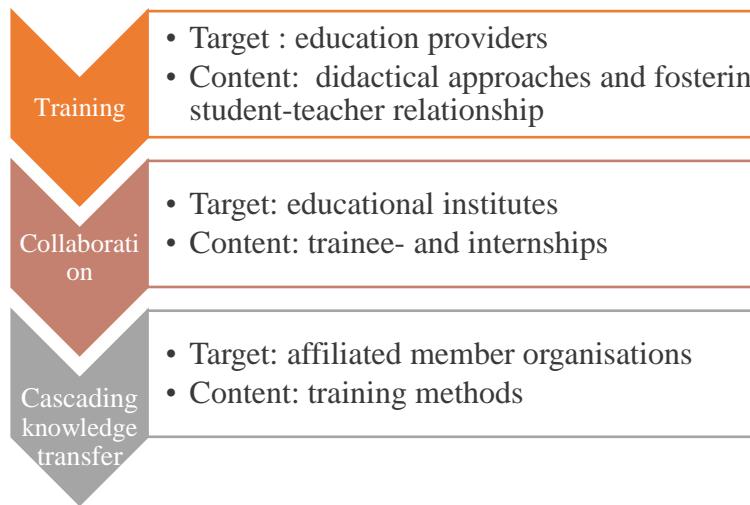


Figure 1. *Upscaling advantages: taking a three-step approach*

In consideration to the key themes identified by Maastricht University experts, there are several actions DECP and its partner organisations can undertake in order to achieve this upscaling. First, training should be offered in order to provide teachers with a broader knowledge of different didactical approaches and the knowledge needed to employ a wide variety of didactical approaches. Additionally, such a training should instigate a step by step reduction of the teacher-student hierarchy so as to lead to a less hierarchical collaboration in learning.

Second, DECP should enhance the collaboration between education and practices, using the leveraging effect of affiliated employer organisations. This increased collaboration between educational institutes and the workplace will bridge the gap between theory and practice. An effective way of reducing this experienced gap is offering internships with sound didactical principles. These internships should focus on introducing students to a different learning climate, supported by trained learning coaches whilst still interacting with either vocational or higher education.

Third, DECP could take advantage of using a cascading method in knowledge transfer. This approach means DECP advisors will train members of the affiliated employer organisations to be able to train their own trainers. This approach will drastically increase the impact of DECP on affecting change. DECP can rely on the active participation of PUM Netherlands senior experts in the process of training the trainers and in the overall efforts of reducing the skills gap experienced in developing countries.



Image 2: The student team of Maastricht University and DECP special advisor Jos van Erp (In the middle)

Conclusions

The OKP is a successful programme according to the perceptions of current international exchange students, education experts, and alumni. Therefore, the Dutch government should continue its investment. Furthermore, international exchange increases knowledge transfer and thus contributes to a certain extent to the economic development of emerging countries. Besides, international exchange programmes contribute to building strong networks in emerging countries of which Nuffic is the ‘engine’.

For DECP, the question remains how to upscale the advantages, especially at the spot. More students should have access to high quality vocational and higher education. Therefore, it is important to gather an appropriate number of highly trained teachers who would display up-to-date knowledge and a variety of didactical approaches. Additionally, the way of working of DECP as advisors to employers’ organisations and the network they are part of (Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Trade Unions, PUM and Nuffic) could be used in joint projects to scale up.

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