

Management Response of current capacity strengthening activities within the FA5 programme and development of a capabilities self-assessment tool

Context of the evaluation

This evaluation was commissioned to Syspans by ITM to assess capacity-strengthening activities implemented under the 5th framework agreement, funded by the Belgian Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (DGD) (FA5, 2022 – 2026) ‘*Connecting the dots – Higher education and Science for a Healthier World*’. The FA5 program supports partnerships between ITM and partner institutions in twelve countries across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with 3 global programs (Education – Policy Support and Synergy). The latter are not included in the scope of this evaluation.

Capacity strengthening forms a central pillar of FA5. Through joint research, training, infrastructure support, and collaboration platforms, FA5 seeks to enable individuals to act as agents of change and partner institutions to operate as drivers of change. By strengthening the link between research, education, and policy engagement, the program ultimately aims to contribute to improved evidence-based health policies and better health outcomes.

Against this background, the evaluation aimed to generate an understanding of how institutional capacity strengthening has been conceptualized and implemented across the FA5 program. Given the diversity of institutional contexts and partnerships, the evaluation focused not only on program activities and outputs, but also on the underlying institutional capabilities that enable sustainable change. To structure this analysis, the evaluation applied the 5C model (developed by Peter Morgan) of organisational capacity development, which examines five interrelated capabilities that influence institutional performance and learning over time .

Importantly, the evaluation was designed not only as a retrospective assessment of FA5, but also as a forward-looking exercise to inform the design of the next programme phase (FA6). In parallel with the evaluation, a 5C Self-Assessment Tool was developed and piloted with partner institutions. This tool aims to support partner-led reflection on institutional strengths and development priorities and to provide a structured basis for dialogue on capacity strengthening within future partnerships. In this way, the evaluation contributes both to accountability for FA5 and to strategic learning for the continued development of the DGD programs.

Conclusions

Overall, the evaluation finds that FA5 has made substantial contributions to strengthening institutional capacities across its partner network. Through long-standing partnerships, joint research, training programmes and infrastructure investments, the programme has supported partner institutions in expanding their human, research, educational and institutional capacities. These joint efforts have enabled many institutions to position themselves as national or regional reference centres, generating knowledge, training professionals and contributing to evidence-informed policies.

A key strength of FA5 lies in the depth and continuity of its partnerships. In many cases, collaborations between ITM and partner institutions span multiple programme phases, creating a foundation of trust, shared learning, and institutional alignment. This long-term engagement has allowed capacity strengthening to move beyond individual training or project-based support and instead contribute to broader institutional development processes. The programme has also successfully combined different forms of support, including scholarships,

joint research, technical assistance, and platform development, creating mutually reinforcing pathways for capacity development.

At the same time, the evaluation highlights that institutional capacity strengthening is a complex and gradual process that unfolds differently across contexts. While many partner institutions demonstrate strong scientific performance and individual expertise, institutional systems that support strategic learning, innovation and adaptive management remain unevenly developed. Challenges related to resource mobilisation, talent management and organisational learning processes continue to affect the extent to which scientific excellence translates into long-term institutional resilience.

Differences between institutional types also shape these dynamics. Universities often benefit from more formalised governance and administrative stability, while national institutes and research centres tend to have clearer mandates and stronger alignment with national policy priorities. Across both types of institutions, however, strengthening organisational learning processes, internal coordination and long-term strategic planning remains an ongoing area for development.

Across partner countries, the evaluation observes strong political commitment to the role of ITM partner institutions and significant potential to further strengthen science-to-policy dialogue. At present, many of these linkages still rely heavily on personal networks and individual relationships, suggesting opportunities to further institutionalise these connections within organisational structures.

Importantly, the evaluation also demonstrates the value of applying the 5C model as an analytical framework for understanding institutional change. By examining capabilities such as leadership, delivery capacity, stakeholder engagement, learning systems, and organisational coherence, the evaluation provides a more nuanced picture of how capacity strengthening occurs in practice. This perspective moves beyond a focus on activities and outputs and instead highlights the institutional mechanisms that enable sustainable change.

Beyond its retrospective assessment, the evaluation has produced a concrete and forward-looking result in the form of the 5C Self-Assessment Tool. Developed and tested in close collaboration with partner institutions, the tool offers a practical instrument for institutional reflection and strategic dialogue. It has the potential to strengthen partner ownership of capacity development processes and support more systematic learning across the programme.

Taken together, the findings suggest that FA5 has laid a strong foundation for institutional capacity strengthening within the ITM partner network. Building on this foundation, the transition to FA6 provides an opportunity to further consolidate these gains by strengthening institutional learning processes, supporting strategic alignment within partner organisations, and fostering peer exchange across the network. In doing so, ITM and its partners can continue to move towards a model of collaboration in which partner institutions increasingly act as autonomous centres of excellence and drivers of change within their health systems



RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING SUPPORTING FA6 IN STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING, GOVERNANCE, AND COLLABORATION STRUCTURES

Recommendation 1: We recommend that ITM implements the 5C-Self-Assessment Tool in collaboration with the partner institutions during the planning and implementation phase of FA6. To ensure that capacity strengthening remains an ongoing and adaptive process, it is recommended that partner institutions and ITM integrate the 5C Self-Assessment Tool into their cycles of planning, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL).

- 1.1 Before implementation, ITM should ensure transparent communication about the objectives of the self-assessment and clarify its own role and level of involvement. It is essential that partners understand that the tool serves as an instrument for institutional reflection and learning, not for external evaluation or control. Early communication materials and orientation sessions can help build trust, create ownership, and ensure that the process is aligned with each institution’s internal priorities and planning cycles
- 1.2 During the roll-out, ITM should closely accompany the first implementations to provide guidance and ensure consistency, while avoiding the creation of parallel reporting or monitoring structures. A joint pilot phase, followed by a reflection workshop, would allow institutions to share experiences, challenges, and practical insights from the process. This peer-learning setting can help identify what worked well, where additional support is needed, and how the tool can best be integrated into existing institutional processes.
- 1.3 The 5C-Self-Assessment Tool should remain a living instrument, continuously adapted based on user feedback and practical experience. Regular reviews, for example after each implementation cycle, can ensure that the tool stays relevant, context-sensitive, and user-friendly. In parallel, further development of the tool’s technical architecture, particularly in terms of programming and data visualisation (e.g. dashboards), should be pursued. This would facilitate longitudinal analysis and comparability across assessment cycles, reduce manual processing efforts, and support the gradual institutionalisation of the tool within partner organisations. ITM can coordinate this process by collecting

Management Response: Recommendation accepted

Accepted

1.1 ITM follows this recommendation of constant transparent communication about the evaluation itself, but also the tool that followed from this evaluation. ITM will ensure that the partners and ITM colleagues receive clear information on the objectives and the intended use of the 5C self-assessment tool, emphasising that is a tool for learning and institutional reflection and the backbone of institutional capacity strengthening in FA6, rather than a pure evaluation tool in itself.

Accepted

1.2. ITM follows the recommendation for the close accompaniment for the first roll out of the tool. That’s why we have asked the expertise of Syspons who have now been so acquainted with the FA5 programme to follow up on this, and helping all the partners and ITM with the necessary guidance for filling this in.

Accepted

1.3. We agree that the 5C Self-Assessment Tool should evolve based on feedback and practical experience. ITM will continue to collect lessons learned from implementation and will update the tool and accompanying guidance materials where necessary. Opportunities to strengthen the technical architecture of the tool, including options for improved data visualisation and longitudinal analysis, will be explored as part of its further development.

lessons learnt, facilitating exchange among partner institutions, and revising both the tool and accompanying guidance materials accordingly	
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Action Plan						
#	Actions planned	Deadline	Responsible Office/Unit/Department	Responsible Person/Role	Implementation stage (not started, underway, delayed, concluded)	Actions (to be) taken
1	Ensure clear communication about the objectives and intended use of the 5C tool	March 2026	International Cooperation Office	Helena Liekens Wouter Boesman	Underway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 5C tool has been presented during all FA6 information sessions with partners and ITM colleagues Background materials shared with partners at the start of the FA6 preparation phase Dissemination of a short explanatory note (2-pager) explaining the purpose of the tool and the role of ITM and Syspons in supporting its implementation
2	Accompanied roll-out of the implementation cycle of the 5C Self-assessment tool	September 2026	International Cooperation Office	Wouter Boesman Helena Liekens	Underway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ITM and Syspons provide guidance to partner institutions during the first implementation cycle Support partners in completing the self-assessment and interpreting results Provide clarification and technical assistance where required

3	Facilitate peer reflection and learning based on first implementation cycle	December 2026	International Cooperation Office	Wouter Boesman Helena Liekens	Not started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organise a reflection moment with partner institutions to discuss lessons learned, challenges and good practices emerging from the first implementation cycle Possible moment during the Joint Partnership Meeting (JPM) 2026 or dedicated learning session
4	Update and refine the 5C Self-assessment tool and guidance materials based on feedback	Start FA6 and ongoing	International Cooperation Office	Helena Liekens	Not started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect feedback from partner institutions following the first implementation cycle Revise the tool and guidance materials where necessary to improve usability and relevance
<p>Recommendation 2: ITM is recommended to strengthen knowledge exchange and cross-learning within ITM and FA6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ITM should further promote systematic knowledge exchange and collaboration across its departments, units, and the partner institutions of FA6 to foster institutional learning and innovation. Drawing on lessons from FA5, ITM may consider creating or further strengthening internal learning mechanisms that are explicitly linked to the 5C self-assessment process. Building on the assessment results, partner institutions could be invited to share at least their priority capability areas with ITM. These priorities would then serve as the basis for a light-touch check-in call to jointly reflect on the findings, clarify support needs, and explore how ITM could add value where relevant. At a next step, ITM could use this information to connect partner institutions that identify similar priority areas or challenges, e.g. talent retention, foresight, institutional adaptability, or emerging topics like AI and data governance and thereby fostering peer exchange, joint problem-solving, or collaboration on concrete initiatives (e.g. joint grant writing or fundraising). This approach could be further strengthened by systematically documenting and curating good practices emerging from the self-assessments and follow-up discussions. Without creating a heavy reporting burden, ITM could collect short, structured practice notes that describe the challenge addressed, the solution applied, and key enabling factors. These good practices could then be actively used to link institutions that demonstrate strengths in specific capability areas with those that are facing difficulties, supporting targeted peer learning and accelerating institutional 				<p>Management Response: Recommendations accepted</p> <p><i>Explanation</i></p> <p>ITM agrees with this recommendation. Strengthening knowledge exchange and cross-learning across ITM and its partner institutions remains an important priority for FA6. Building on the results of the 5C self-assessment process, ITM intends to use the priority capability areas identified by partner institutions themselves as an entry point for institutional capacity strengthening activities under FA6.</p> <p>In addition to capacity strengthening embedded within the FA6 outcomes, ITM will also seek to connect partner institutions that identify similar institutional priorities, strengths and challenges across outcomes. These groups will provide a basis for targeted peer exchange, joint learning and the development of concrete institutional capacity strengthening initiatives.</p> <p>The FA6 network structure will therefore play an important role in supporting collaboration, knowledge sharing and the identification of good practices across the partnership. ITM will also explore ways to track progress and facilitate exchanges between these thematic capacity strengthening groups, with the aim of strengthening institutional learning across the network.</p>		

learning across the partnership network. To maximise the impact of these efforts, the network structure within FA6 should be further supported and institutionalised, providing a clear framework for continuous exchange and peer learning among partner institutions. Strengthening the network in this way would help connect expertise across contexts, encourage the replication and adaptation of effective practices, and reinforce a culture of mutual learning and shared innovation across the partnership portfolio

Action Plan

#	Actions planned	Deadline	Responsible Office/Unit/Department	Responsible Person/Role	Implementation stage (not started, underway, delayed, concluded)	Actions (to be) taken
1	Analyse & integrate the results of the 5C self-assessments to identify priority capability areas across partner institutions in FA6	May 2026	International Cooperation Office	Helena Liekens Wouter Boesman Valérie Vermeersch	Underway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5C Self-assessment tool to be finalised by all the partners (End of March deadline) - Review and synthesis of assessment results - Identification of common priority capability areas across the network
2	Identify partner institutions that share similar institutional priorities	September 2026	International Cooperation Office	Helena Liekens Wouter Boesman Valérie Vermeersch	Not started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cluster partner priorities emerging from the 5C self-assessments - Identify potential 'capacity strengthening groups' across institutions/outcomes
3	Organise targeted exchanges, trainings in these 'capacity strengthening groups'	Throughout FA6 (2027 – 2031)	International Cooperation Office	Helena Liekens Wouter Boesman Valérie Vermeersch	Not started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitate exchanges between institutions who have the same institutional capacity strengthening priorities - Organise peer-learning sessions, joint reflections meetings, targeted trainings

4	Use the FA6 partnership to support knowledge exchange and dissemination of good practices	Throughout FA6 (2027 – 2031)	International Cooperation Office		Not started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sharing emerging practices and lessons across partner institutions
5	Track the progress of these capacity strengthening priorities and exchanges	Start FA6 (January 2027) – End FA6 (December 2031)	International Cooperation Office	Helena Liekens	Not started	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Set up of indicators - Integrate tracking into FA6 monitoring processes - Periodically review progress and adapt support where needed

Signature: _____

Name and position: _____

Date: _____