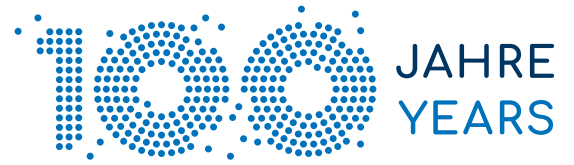




Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
German Academic Exchange Service



Executive Summary

SDG Graduate Schools

Monitoring-based Programme Evaluation

February 2025



Background and objectives of the evaluation

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is the world's largest funding organisation for the exchange of students and academics. With funds from the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (*Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, BMZ*) DAAD has been financing the programme “**SDG Graduate Schools**“ since 2016, thus promoting the establishment of seven SDG Graduate Schools in the Global South. The long-term objective of the programme is to contribute to sustainable development in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as to the development of high-performing and cosmopolitan universities in Germany and the partner countries. The programme combines elements of institutional and individual support, and is currently in its second funding phase (2021-2025). An extension of the programme and a new call for project funding for an initial period of five years with the prospect of follow-up funding for another five years is envisaged.

Together with the funding ministry, DAAD decided to commission an evaluation of the programme's current funding phase ending in 2025. The **primary objective** of the evaluation was to assess the achievement of objectives on the programme level. Hence, the primary task of the evaluation was to determine how the achievement of objectives and impact have progressed ever since the end of the first programme phase. The **period under review**, thus, extended from the beginning of the second programme period in 2021 until 2023, with 2023 representing the last reporting year, for which a complete set of monitoring data was available for analysis. The focus of the evaluation was on the **programme level**. An evaluation of project progress on the level of the seven funded projects was not part of the analysis.

The primary target groups (i.e., the **intended users**) of the evaluation are **BMZ** as the programme's funding agency, **DAAD** (especially the executive board, P31 as the responsible programme unit, section S12 responsible for statistics, monitoring and evaluation) and possibly further programme sections and units within DAAD, cooperation partners, project managers in Germany and abroad as well as the interested public.

The evaluation and the questions it addressed were largely structured according to the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria (relevance, effectiveness, goal achievement and impact, efficiency, sustainability), as well as the criterion of coordination, complementarity and coherence.

Evaluation design and methodology

For the evaluation of the “SDG Graduate Schools” programme, the evaluators chose a theory-based, participatory, mixed-methods approach. The evaluation was designed as a **monitoring-based** evaluation, which primarily relied on the use of existing data from the results-based programme monitoring. Hence, the study was built on a comprehensive **desk study**, which combined document analyses and the analysis of qualitative and quantitative **secondary data**. Having considered the evaluation's objectives as well as the feasibility of the required analyses based on the available monitoring data, it was decided not to collect any complementary primary data.

Evaluation results

With regard to the evaluation criterion of **relevance**, the evaluation concludes that both the programme “SDG Graduate Schools” as such and the measures it supports (projects) are highly relevant in the context of international and national development agendas. The programme and the funded projects are clearly in line with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and build on the key role of high-quality (higher) education in achieving the SDGs. The programme addresses the interests and needs of the participating universities in the partner countries and enables measures to be planned and implemented in line with these needs.

With regard to **effectiveness, goal achievement and impact**, the overall assessment is also positive. The programme’s funding instruments are suitable and appropriate for achieving the programme’s objectives. The assumptions underlying the programme logic could be confirmed based on the results found in relation to goal achievement. No fundamental adjustments were found to be necessary in terms of the programme’s design. The analysis of goal achievement showed that the funded projects have achieved (in some cases significant) results in line with the intended programme outputs. Hence, four of the six intended programme outcomes have already been largely or fully achieved, that is, before the end of the programme period, while two objectives so far have been partially achieved. Room for improvement was detected in relation to the extent to which external actors from outside of science and research and especially from the private sector are being involved in the implementation of the projects. Overall, goal achievement is largely on time, despite various limitations having resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic as well as from challenging project environments in the partner countries. Thus, it can be expected that five out of six programme objectives will be fully achieved by the end of the current programme period, while one objective is likely to maintain its status as “partly achieved” due to an unnecessarily narrow operationalisation and an overly ambitious target value for digitalisation in teaching.

Considering the **efficiency** criterion, it can be summarised that the outputs and outcomes achieved to date are in balance with the resources deployed. Furthermore, the scope of funding provided for the implementation of the projects is appropriate in view of the expected project outcomes.

With respect to **sustainability**, it is worth highlighting that sustainability was explicitly anchored in the intended programme outcomes. As a result, a number of personnel-related and institutional arrangements have been made during the current funding period in order to secure the long-term sustainability of the developments achieved in the fields of education, research, knowledge transfer and networking as well as the continued use of the delivered results. However, financial sustainability remains a challenge.

In relation to **coordination, complementarity and coherence**, the evaluation revealed great potential for synergies within the programme itself, which are the primary results of the SDG Graduate Schools Alliance founded by the funded projects. The alliance epitomises the idea of forming partnerships for development as put forth by SDG17, applies it to the field of higher education and altogether represents a promising development also in view of the sustainability of the programme.

From a meta perspective, the evaluation results also showed that it is possible to conduct an analysis of programme progress and goal achievement with reasonable effort and based on the data generated through a programme’s results-oriented monitoring. In terms of programme monitoring the evaluation found only limited room for improvement.

Conclusions and recommendations

The results of the current programme phase allow for a positive overall assessment of the “SDG Graduate Schools” programme and its second funding phase. Both in terms of intended impacts and the approaches and instruments employed, the programme is highly consistent with the objectives pursued by the Federal Government in the fields of sustainable development, development cooperation, as well as science and research. The programme is furthermore highly relevant for the achievement of these objectives. Goal achievement is on time. The programme objectives are likely to be largely achieved by the end of the current programme phase. In view of further managing the current programme phase as well as a potential next one starting in 2026, the following **recommendations** are addressed to the responsible DAAD programme section **P31**:

1. In view of the programme’s relevance and positive track record in terms of goal achievement, it is recommended that DAAD advocates for the **continuation of the programme** vis à vis BMZ. The programme concept is coherent and should essentially be maintained for a possible next programme phase both with regard to the formulation of objectives and the funding instruments.
2. The **developments witnessed by the programme** ever since its set-up in 2016 should be mirrored on the level of the programme’s impact logic and indicators, which is why both instruments should be updated accordingly. In doing so, DAAD should reflect on the intended role of Post Docs as a target group within the programme, the level of ambition expected in relation to digitalisation and ICT-based methods in teaching and education, as well as the baseline situation of projects embarking on a second funding phase.
3. With regard to **digitalisation**, a fundamental review and renewed clarification of the objectives is recommended. In that respect it is important to develop realistic objectives and expectations for the funded projects in dialogue with BMZ, which take appropriate account of digitalisation developments below the threshold of online teaching formats. Once (re)defined, these objectives should be consistently integrated into the programme’s results-based monitoring, that is, goals, indicators and data collection instruments should be harmonised.
4. The potential for increasing the effectiveness of the programme through **cross-project networking and knowledge transfer** between the funded graduate schools should be further exploited. To promote this, DAAD should consider to what extent this type of synergies within the programme can be incorporated more explicitly into the programme’s impact logic. In this context, providing additional programme funds for that purpose should be considered as an option, as well as the introduction of a new programme component (“transfer component”) similar to the one incorporated in DAAD’s neighbouring “Exceed-Programme”, which is also funded by BMZ.
5. Taking into account the interaction of the graduate schools with **external actors especially from the private sector**, which could still be improved, the role foreseen for this stakeholder group within the programme logic should be reviewed. If this group of actors is considered relevant for goal achievement or intended to be given a greater role in the future, it is worth highlighting that role more explicitly in the programme documents as well as in the call for proposals for a possible next funding period, while also paying greater attention to that aspect in the communication with the funded projects and in the programme’s management and steering.
6. With respect to **sustainability**, the responsible project managers should be encouraged to continue their search for ways to foster financial sustainability. Together with the funded projects, the responsible programme section at DAAD should particularly reflect on the possibilities – as well as potential limitations (e.g., due to restrictions of public funding schemes) – of utilizing results and outputs produced within the context of the projects for that matter (for example, as an input to tap new sources of funding).

7. In relation to the **programme's monitoring**, the evaluators recommend that the few inconsistencies detected between programme indicators, operationalisation and annual reporting be harmonised. Generally speaking, any revision or renewal of the programme's annual report in DAAD's monitoring tool should once again be quality checked, if necessary, in coordination with DAAD section S12, in order to avoid any impairments of data quality. Apart from that and in order to simplify the analysis of monitoring data in the programme department (e.g., target-performance comparisons), further development of the programme's monitoring should also involve the formulation of realistic target values for core indicators. At the same time, specifying concrete target values on the programme level should not inhibit needs-based planning on the project level.

Against the backdrop of the experiences gathered throughout the implementation of the monitoring-based evaluation of the "SDG Graduate Schools" programme, the following recommendations are directed towards **DAAD section S12**, responsible for statistics, monitoring and evaluation:

8. Provided that monitoring-based evaluations shall play a more significant role as one of DAAD's evaluation instruments, the learnings from this evaluation regarding the possibilities and limitations of this type of evaluation should be taken into account and fed into the development of future **terms of reference** for this sort of evaluations.
9. The evaluation criterion "coordination, complementarity and coherence", among others, is relevant against the backdrop of potential synergies between programmes and projects within DAAD. However, it is not yet systematically covered within the standard DAAD annual reporting tool. Thus, it should be considered whether a corresponding query could be integrated in the **annual reporting template** as a standard question for DAAD programmes with project funding.
10. For any monitoring-based evaluation within DAAD, the data from DAAD's results-based monitoring represent the primary data source. Hence, the feasibility of a results-based evaluation heavily depends on the quality of that data. Therefore, S12 should elaborate proposals on how to **secure the quality of the programmed annual reports** even better. Also, by means of sensitisation activities and support materials, S12 could generate helpful stimuli in the direction of sections responsible for programme management.

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