SCHOOL for THINKTANKERS

On Think Tanks

ECF – SCHOOL FOR THINKTANKERS FOR EMERGING OR START-UP THINK TANKS

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW AND COURSE STRUCTURE

A six-week online programme for emerging and start-up think tanks in the ECF network

4 NOVEMBER – 11 DECEMBER 2026

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1. WELCOME

Welcome to the School for Thinktankers for emerging or start-up think tanks. Over six weeks, you will address the key decisions that define an emerging or start-up policy research organisation: its purpose, governance, costs, visibility, and the considerations surrounding potential growth.

Most materials are available on the course page for self-paced study, while live sessions focus on your organisation and those of your peers. Each session includes a brief task relevant to your own organisation.

- **Dates:** 4 November – 11 December 2026, with live sessions on Wednesdays
- **Time:** about 2.5 to 3 hours per week, including the live session

BEFORE YOU START

Read the general information in this document and complete the entry evaluation provided in your welcome email before the introductory session on Wednesday 4 November.

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2. INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS PROGRAMME

Most existing guidance for think tanks is aimed at organisations with established communications teams, finance officers and funded strategies. This programme is designed for organisations where one person may handle fundraising, budgeting and much of the research, and where the main constraints are time, financial resources and organisational scale rather than ambition.

It adapts the content of OTT's flagship School for Thinktankers, held annually and in person, to organisations that are small, newly established, or both. The central question is what good practice looks like for organisations of this size and what specific decisions they must make.

OBJECTIVES

- **Clarify strategy:** articulate where your organisation creates value, and how it balances research, communications and advocacy.
- **Strengthen the essentials:** build working knowledge of governance, financial management and fundraising at the scale of a small organisation.
- **Anticipate risks and opportunities:** prepare for what could knock a small organisation off course or open new doors in its first years, including visibility, integrity, finances, and the political context.
- **Support decisions about scale:** judge whether and how to grow — in size, footprint, influence or partnerships — rather than assume that growth is the goal.
- **Build a peer cohort:** learn from think tanks at similar stages of development, as much as from the facilitators.

OUR APPROACH

The programme draws on OTT's *Build a think tank* guide, the School for Thinktankers, and over fifteen years of advisory work with think tanks in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. Three principles shape how it is taught:

- **Decisions, not best practice:** each session ends with something you have decided, drafted or crossed off.
- **Prioritisation is a critical skill:** with limited resources, deciding what to exclude often matters more than adding activities. Sessions 2, 3 and 4 focus on refining your plans by removing less essential elements.
- **Peers before trainers:** live sessions are facilitated discussions. You will present your organisation's situation and comment on others'.

3. STRUCTURE AND DELIVERY

FORMAT

The programme is fully online and has three components:

- **Self-paced content:** each session has a module on the course page with a short video, a recorded presentation, two or three readings and relevant templates. Plan around 45–50 minutes before each live session.
- **Live sessions:** six seminar-style sessions on Google Meet: an introduction, four content sessions and a closing session. Each includes a short framing input from the facilitator, structured discussion, small-group work and peer feedback.
- **Tasks and quizzes:** a short quiz after each module and one task per session applied to your own organisation.

The total time investment is about 12 hours over 6 weeks.

PREPARING FOR EACH SESSION

- Work through the module on the course page before the session, and take the quiz when you finish it.
- Attend the live sessions: the value of the cohort depends on participants being present and engaged.

CERTIFICATE

A certificate of participation will be issued to participants who attend at least four of the six live sessions, submit at least three of the four session tasks, and complete both evaluations.

4. WHERE EVERYTHING LIVES

COURSE PAGE — OTT.SCHOOL

The course page on ott.school holds the session videos, slide decks, readings, templates and recordings. It is organised in modules and stays available after the programme ends.

GOOGLE CLASSROOM

Google Classroom carries announcements, forums, session reminders, deadlines, tasks and quizzes. You submit your session tasks there and receive comments on them. Notifications come from Classroom, so keep them switched on.

CONTACT

For queries requiring a response from OTT, use Google Classroom or email Camila Ulloa at culloa@onthinktanks.org.

5. TASKS, QUIZZES AND EVALUATION

There is no competitive grading. The objective is for each participant to complete four substantive pieces of work on their own organisation, so that both OTT and your organisation can see progress and change.

WHAT	WHEN	PURPOSE
Entry evaluation	Before 4 November	Baseline: organisational profile, self-rated confidence across the four content areas, and what you want from the programme
Module quiz	After each module, before the next session	Five questions on the self-paced content. Auto-marked.
Session task	Within a week of each session	Applied to your own organisation. Feedback from the facilitator in Google Classroom.
Exit evaluation	After 9 December	The same confidence scale as the entry evaluation, plus what your organisation changed or decided, and what was missing

Table 1. Assessment at a glance

THE FOUR SESSION TASKS

Each task starts from what you already have. Where a document exists (a strategy, a board, a budget), review it against the session and recommend how to adapt it. Where it does not, draft a first version.

1. **Positioning note:** one page on where your organisation creates value compared with others in its policy space, what it offers that they do not, your two or three priority policy questions, and which functions it delivers.
2. **Board map:** reflections on your current board or governing group, its skills, gaps, and what you will do about them.
3. **Budget analysis:** develop and reflect on your organisational budget using the templates provided.
4. **Risks and opportunities:** identify risks and opportunities for visibility, integrity, finances and the political context, and what you will do about each.

Together, these four documents closely resemble an organisational plan, which is what the closing session is built around.

6. PROGRAMME SCHEDULE

Live sessions run on Wednesdays, 15:00–17:00 Central European Time (CET), except Session 2, which will take place on Monday 16 November, 15:00–17:00 CET. You will receive a Google Calendar invitation with the Google Meet link for each session. You can add all events to your calendar here.

In addition to each two-hour live session, plan for about 45 minutes of self-paced work beforehand and time for the task afterwards.

DATE (CET)	SESSION	FOCUS	FACILITATOR	DUE
Before 4 Nov	**Entry evaluation**	Link in your welcome email and in Google Classroom	—	—
Wed 4 Nov 15:00–16:00	**Introductory session**	How the programme works, the platforms, introductions	Camila Ulloa	—
Wed 11 Nov 15:00–17:00	**Module 1**	Strategy, positioning and scale	Camila Ulloa and a guest speaker	17 Nov
Mon 16 Nov 15:00–17:00	**Module 2**	Governance and running a small organisation	Enrique Mendizabal	24 Nov
Wed 25 Nov 15:00–17:00	**Module 3**	Money: what you cost and what you charge	Fiorella Bianchi	1 Dec
Wed 2 Dec 15:00–17:00	**Module 4**	Completing the basics: preparing for future risks and opportunities	Camila Ulloa and a guest speaker	8 Dec
Wed 9 Dec 15:00–16:30	**Closing session**	Decisions and next steps, peer feedback, what continues	—	—
By 11 Dec	**Exit evaluation**	Link shared at the closing session	—	11 Dec

Table 2. Programme calendar, November–December 2026

INTRODUCTORY SESSION — WEDNESDAY 4 NOVEMBER, 15:00–16:00 CET

Facilitated by Camila Ulloa · Session link: meet.google.com/yca-tpti-zfs

Before the live session: complete the entry evaluation sent in your welcome email, read the background note on the course page (about 10 minutes) and prepare a two-minute introduction to your organisation.

TIME	ACTION
15:00–15:10	Welcome, how the programme works, what is expected each week
15:10–15:15	The course page and Google Classroom
15:15–15:25	What the entry evaluation showed, and how the sessions respond to it
15:25–15:45	Introductions — two to three minutes per organisation
15:45–16:00	Logistics and next steps

Table 3. Introductory session agenda

IN THIS MODULE

- Reading 1. Introduction to think tanks (about 5 minutes)
- Further reading: State of the Sector Report 2026; a conversation with Simon Maxwell

CLOSING SESSION — WEDNESDAY 9 DECEMBER, 15:00–16:30 CET

Session link: meet.google.com/usu-oxyg-vsp

Before the session: bring your four session tasks. Together they closely resemble an organisational plan, which is what this session is built around. Prepare a three-minute presentation on the decisions your organisation is evaluating or has taken, and what it will do next.

TIME	ACTION
15:00–15:10	What we heard across the four sessions
15:10–16:05	Each organisation presents, in three minutes, the decisions it is evaluating or has taken and what it will do next
16:05–16:20	Peer commitments: who will follow up with whom
16:20–16:30	What continues — the course page, the cohort, OTT's wider work

Table 4. Closing session agenda

Exit evaluation: complete it after the session, by 11 December. It uses the same confidence scale as the entry evaluation and asks what your organisation changed or decided, and what was missing. Completing both evaluations is required for the certificate.

What continues: the course page, with all videos, readings, templates and recordings, stays available after the programme ends.

7. THE MODULES

Each content session has the same shape: a self-paced module and quiz, a guiding question, two hours of facilitated discussion, and a task applied to your own organisation.

MODULE 1. STRATEGY, POSITIONING AND SCALE

Wednesday 11 November · 15:00–17:00 CET · Facilitated by Camila Ulloa and a guest speaker · Session link: meet.google.com/xvh-ykye-drp

> *What is your organisation for, and what can it do that nobody else does?*

Before the live session: work through this module before the session (about 45 minutes) and bring your questions to the live session.

WHAT WE COVER

- **The current context:** working when the policy space is polarised, and reaching audiences you never had to reach before.
- **Political space:** local, national, regional or European — each implies different governance, skills and strategy. Mapping who else already occupies yours.
- **Scope:** choosing policy questions rather than research interests; a few initiatives rather than many projects; the case for a single-issue or sectoral focus when you are small.
- **Values:** every think tank has an ideological position; evidence does not tell you what to do. Being explicit about yours helps with funders, recruitment and credibility.
- **Research, communications, advocacy:** which functions you deliver, which you want to deliver, and what each demands in skills, staff and funding. Most organisations are further from their stated position than they think.

IN THIS MODULE

- Reading 1. Build a think tank: The Why? questions (about 15 minutes)
- Reading 2. Build a think tank: The What? questions (about 20 minutes)
- Reading 3. Setting up a think tank: a new model and a short strategy (about 5 minutes)

TASK FOR THE WEEK

A one-page positioning note: where you create value compared with others in your policy space and what you offer that they do not; two or three priority policy questions; and which functions you deliver. If you already have a strategy, review it against the session and note what you would change.

Submit your task in Google Classroom within a week of the session; the facilitator will comment on it there. Take the five-question quiz in Google Classroom when you finish the module. **Task and quiz due: 17 November.**

MODULE 2. GOVERNANCE AND RUNNING A SMALL ORGANISATION

Monday 16 November · 15:00–17:00 CET · Facilitated by Enrique Mendizabal · Session link: meet.google.com/zbq-gueh-hvt

> *What is the basic structure that lets you make good decisions and be taken seriously?*

Before the live session: work through this module before the session (about 50 minutes) and bring your questions to the live session.

WHAT WE COVER

- **Boards for small organisations:** four or five members is usually right. Choose them for what they add — think tank experience, finance, law, communications, access to funders — not just for their name. If you are the subject expert, you need what you are missing, not more subject experts.
- **Separating the three jobs:** strategic oversight, management and doing the work. In founder-led organisations, these sit with the same two or three people; the session looks at how to start pulling them apart without adding cost.
- **People:** staffing models when you cannot afford staff: associates, young researchers, partnerships, consultancy alongside public-good work. A formal research associate category shows capacity and gives credibility without payroll.
- **Policies:** write the ones you are required to have or genuinely need. We go through the short list that matters at this size.
- **Deciding what to take on:** simple rules for accepting or declining work, so that requests do not quietly set your agenda.

IN THIS MODULE

- Reading 1. Build a think tank: the Who? questions (about 30 minutes)
- Reading 2. Strategic governance and management (about 10 minutes)
- Reading 3. Setting up a think tank: leaders, people and governance (about 5 minutes)

TASK FOR THE WEEK

A board analysis: reflect on your governing group or board against the skill areas, what they have, what gaps you identify, and what you will do about them.

Submit your task in Google Classroom within a week of the session; the facilitator will comment on it there. Take the five-question quiz in Google Classroom when you finish the module. **Task and quiz due: 24 November.**

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MODULE 3. MONEY: WHAT YOU COST AND WHAT YOU CHARGE

Wednesday 25 November · 15:00–17:00 CET · Facilitated by Fiorella Bianchi · Session link: meet.google.com/feg-syme-rso

> *What does it really cost to run your organisation, what must a project earn to be worth taking, and how do you start building reserves from day one?*

Before the live session: work through this module before the session (about 35 minutes) and bring your questions to the live session.

WHAT WE COVER

- **Three budgets, not one:** the organisational budget (what you need in order to exist), the internal project budget (what the work really costs you) and the funder budget (what you present).
- **Direct and indirect costs:** knowing your own indirect rate, whatever a funder will pay. Small and new organisations run higher rates — that is arithmetic, not mismanagement — and you need the number before you can negotiate a cap.
- **Reserves:** why three to six months of operating costs is the target, and how a non-profit builds a surplus without tax surprises.
- **Contingency:** inflation, exchange rates and multi-year projects. Funders rarely adjust a budget when things get harder; the budget you wrote is the protection you get.
- **Choosing projects:** cost recovery, minimum margins and declining work that does not pay for itself. Grants versus service contracts, and asking funders about reporting requirements before you sign.
- **Diversifying income:** moving from project-by-project funding towards something more predictable, without depending on a single donor or type of income.

IN THIS MODULE

- Reading 1. Build a think tank: What will its business model be? (about 10 minutes)
- Reading 2. Build a think tank: Who will fund it and who will support it? (about 10 minutes)
- Reading 3. Fundraising and financial management (about 10 minutes)
- Templates

TASK FOR THE WEEK

Develop and reflect on your organisational budget and one real internal project budget, with your indirect rate and a reserve target. If you already have them, review them against the templates and note what you would change.

Submit your task in Google Classroom within a week of the session; the facilitator will comment on it there. Take the five-question quiz in Google Classroom when you finish the module. **Task and quiz due: 1 December.**

MODULE 4. COMPLETING THE BASICS: PREPARING FOR FUTURE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Wednesday 2 December · 15:00–17:00 CET · Facilitated by Camila Ulloa, with a guest speaker · Session link: meet.google.com/cre-kzci-whq

> *What could knock a small organisation off course, or open new doors: visibility, integrity, finances and the political context?*

Before the live session: work through this module before the session (about 50 minutes) and bring your real documents to the live session.

WHAT WE COVER

- **Looking ahead:** a small organisation cannot afford to get its research agenda wrong. If it puts everything on one issue and the issue fades, it becomes irrelevant. Scenario planning helps you anticipate change and decide where to place your bets.
- **Visibility:** staying in the public debate without the budget for a large campaign: work on policy problems rather than research topics, plan a package of outputs, publish as you go and prioritise the few actions with the most impact.
- **Integrity and reputation:** a small or new organisation cannot easily recover a damaged reputation. Be ready for the media agenda to try to set yours, and think through what happens if a large amount of money arrives. The integrity health check helps you keep your values and red lines under review.
- **Learning and adapting:** tracking whether the organisation is growing in the direction you chose, and deciding where to invest next. MEL in proportion: two indicators, one learning meeting a quarter, a theory of change that fits on a page.

IN THIS MODULE

- Reading 1. Think tanks and forward thinking: navigating uncertain contexts (about 10 minutes)
- Reading 2. Understanding policy problems (about 5 minutes)
- Reading 3. Build a think tank: How will it carry out research? (about 5 minutes)
- Reading 4. Setting up a think tank: getting visible from the start (about 5 minutes)
- Reading 5. Build a think tank: How will you ensure its credibility? (about 5 minutes)
- Reading 6. The role of think tanks amid political uncertainty: building trust (about 5 minutes)
- Reading 7. Build a think tank: How will it monitor its progress? (about 5 minutes)

TASK FOR THE WEEK

Create a risk and opportunity map for visibility, integrity, finances, and the political context: one risk and one opportunity you can already see, and what you will do about each.

Submit your task in Google Classroom within a week of the session; the facilitator will comment on it there. Take the five-question quiz in Google Classroom when you finish the module. **Task and quiz due: 8 December.**

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