Beach, Sun, Sangria ... Think Tanks?

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A Week at OTT's 2025 School: Lessons on Leading the Think Tanks of Tomorrow

by Julia Gruber

In the ever-evolving policy research and advocacy landscape, think tanks must continuously adapt, collaborate, and innovate to remain effective. While there are many important aspects to consider, a crucial part of this evolution is to invest in the next generation—the future leaders of think tanks; equipping young professionals with the skills, networks, and insights needed to tackle the challenges of tomorrow.

As a representative of the EPIS Think Tank, I had the privilege of attending the **OTT School for ThinkTankers 2025**—a five-day intensive workshop organised by *On Think Tanks (OTT), a global consultancy committed to strengthening research organisations, foundations, and think tanks. This programme welcomed four young representatives from student-led think*

tanks around the world, providing us with a unique opportunity to engage with experts, refine our strategic thinking, and explore innovative approaches to shaping policy.

Bringing together 30 international participants from diverse professional backgrounds, the programme offered a comprehensive introduction to key aspects of think tank management. Covering topics such as good governance and people management, finance and fundraising, policy Influence, communications, and future-proofing think tanks, it provided an opportunity not only to develop expertise but also to engage with fellow participants and leading experts in the field.

Strengthening Leadership & Communication:My Goals for the Week

Over the past year, the **EPIS Think Tank**, has grown significantly, now bringing together over 200 students passionate about foreign and security policy. However, there is still ample room for growth. As a Member of the Board and Head of External Affairs and Communications at EPIS, I approached the workshop with three primary objectives:

The program provided an ideal setting to explore these topics. Learning from experts such as **Goran Buldioski** (Hertie School), **Sonja Stojanovic Gajic** (an experienced think tank leader), and **David Watson** (Chatham House) was particularly insightful. Each session deepened my understanding of what makes a think tank truly effective in shaping policy debates, and my hopes and expectations for the week were fully met.

The Value of Dialogue and Exchange

Interestingly, while the structured sessions provided a wealth of knowledge, some of the most valuable insights emerged through informal discussions.

Coffee breaks, networking lunches, evening gatherings, and shared sangrias—conversations with fellow participants offered a highly interesting exchange of the diverse challenges think tanks face across different regions. I learned about the unique struggles of think tanks in Malaysia, where navigating political sensitivities is a constant challenge. Meanwhile, in the United States, think tanks must adapt to an environment where fact-based research is increasingly questioned in favour of populist narratives. These discussions made me realise:

The role of think tanks in today's world can no longer be taken for granted.

At a time when data-driven research is increasingly questioned and policy decisions are shaped more by narratives than empirical evidence, think tanks must rethink their engagement strategies. Producing high-quality research alone is no longer sufficient; ensuring that findings reach the right stakeholders in compelling and actionable ways is equally crucial.

Future-Proofing Think Tanks

One of the most thought-provoking sessions was led by *Krizna Gomez*, a Harvard Law School graduate and founder of Tala Strategies, who introduced us to future-thinking methodologies designed to help think tanks navigate uncertainty.

She encouraged us to adopt a strategic foresight toolkit:

Her core message was clear: "We cannot predict the future, but we can prepare for it.". This shift in perspective—from forecasting change to proactively equipping think tanks for multiple future scenarios—was one of the program's most valuable takeaways.

Looking Ahead

Reflecting on this experience, I am grateful to OTT for recognising the value of student-led think tanks and providing a platform for our voices to be heard. The opportunity to exchange ideas with experts and representatives from diverse backgrounds reinforced my belief that collaboration and shared learning are fundamental to the success of think tanks.

Beyond the formal discussions, this experience also served as a reminder of the importance of informal, open conversations. Some of the most meaningful exchanges took place in relaxed settings, where participants felt comfortable sharing their insights and experiences honestly—sometimes even quite emotionally.

Returning from Barcelona, I feel ready to contribute to the growth and development of EPIS. We are already in the process of integrating some strategies and approaches discussed during the workshop, and I look forward to continuing the dialogue with my fellow participants in the future.

To OTT, the speakers, and all my fellow attendees, I am grateful for the enriching and inspiring experience. I look forward to seeing how these conversations evolve and where they will lead us next.