

The United Nations University after Ten Years:  
Some Personal Reflections

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The United Nations University after ten years of operations has developed a distinctive institutional identity within the United Nations system and the international academic community. The identity of any institution is revealed by the answers to four questions:

- What is it?
- Where is it?
- What does it do?
- How does it do things?

The United Nations University is a worldwide community of scholars but one without a permanently fixed institutional or personal membership. Its constituent elements are constantly shifting in response to the emergence of new tasks, issues and needs. The UNU is a creation of the United Nations, which is an inter-governmental body, but the University is governed by individuals acting in their own right and composed of scholars and academic institutions rather than governmental bodies.

The United Nations University is not a place, though it has a Centre. It is disembodied in the same sense that international financial or commodity markets are disembodied, involving many actors and having multiple centres of activity at any one time.

The United Nations University does research, training, and dissemination of knowledge on pressing global problems that are parallel to the concerns of the United Nations. The major thrust of its programme is directed toward achieving a better understanding of the dynamics of development-- development in the largest sense of the term, which encompasses issues of human welfare and survival as well as improved material standards of living.



This concept of development involves all regions of the world, not just the Third World, and it is articulated in the context of a world that is continually changing, and changing at a dizzying pace. Therefore, the concerns of the UNU must evolve in order to respond to--and ideally, to anticipate-- the mutations in the shape of existing problems, the emergence of new problems, the changing perspectives on and perceptions of problems, and the shifts in the intellectual climate prevailing in different cultural settings.

The problems that the UNU must address are complex and closely interlinked. It is no longer possible to look at development as an independent variable within the stable environment of a single state. Rather, the most critical issues arise at the intersections of traditional disciplines and fields of study: security and development; environment and population; hunger and poverty; interdependence and autonomy; integration and tolerance of diversity. The United Nations University addresses its work to practical problems, but also seeks to illuminate the basic relationships underlying them rather than merely to prescribe short-term responses.

The United Nations University does its work through programmes and institutions. Programmatically, the work of the University is arranged under five broad themes and nine programme areas. Its methodology is collaborative research, training that is closely related to the research topics, and the use of both traditional and innovative learning materials and techniques to disseminate knowledge widely.

UNU research takes place through networks that span ideological, cultural and geographical divisions. It is multi-disciplinary and multi-leveled, addressing issues in their local, national, regional and global manifestations.

UNU training takes place largely through institutions, which participate in defining their own needs and capabilities. Fellowships for post-graduate training are designed not just to enhance the skills of individuals, but rather to strengthen the institutions to which the fellows belong.



The dissemination activities of the UNU are aimed at diverse constituencies. These include academia, of course, but also include the poor, the illiterate, the uneducated. Part of the University's task is to try to reach the less privileged with scientific knowledge that will be useful to them in their daily lives, and also to provide channels for the expression of their needs, their concerns and their considerable stock of commonsensical wisdom.

In positioning itself, the UNU has had to learn to live with certain internal tensions arising from the varied needs, demands and perspectives of its multiple constituencies. How, for example, is it possible to reconcile the different interests of the developing countries, which have a special status among the constituencies of the UNU, with the interests of the industrialized countries, which are the major actual and potential donors to the University? How can the UNU retain academic credibility and relevance in the eyes of both?

The UNU also must constantly weigh the emphasis to be given to "cutting edge" research as opposed to research on the persistent, mundane problems that continue to afflict the vast majority of people. There is a constant tension between the need for a sharp focus and the obligation to maintain a global presence. Flexibility and responsiveness pull the institution in one direction, while the desire for stability and continuity pull it in another.

The question of standards is a difficult one to resolve in a multi-cultural setting such as the UNU, particularly when the most important modality is collaborative research in international networks. The UNU must maintain high academic standards according to some widely accepted yardsticks, but it must also remain pluralistic, and operate on the recognition that standards are different in different cultural settings.

It is extremely important that the United Nations University acts as, and is perceived as a global institution. This means that, although its primary concern is with development, in the broadest sense, it needs to develop constituencies, comprehension and support in the North. In fact, the UNU is well placed to assist scholars from North and South to work together to develop a common language and shared perceptions. In this



way, it can help to decrease the continuing gap between theories of development in the North and the realities of the South. In this sense particularly, the UNU has avoided and must continue to avoid the trap of acting as if only the South is in need of further knowledge.

The first Medium Term Perspective was designed to broaden the University's focus on development, to involve it more deeply in the other areas mandated by the UNU Charter, namely survival and welfare. UNU activities over the last five years have raised a whole set of second-generation questions and have made obvious the linkages among issues. The problems addressed under the nine programme areas have begun to coalesce into a relatively few, critically important trans-sectoral and trans-disciplinary clusters.

Among these are the issues arising from the evolution of a unified global economy, which will be the subjects of research and training at WIDER; the inter-relationship among bio-physical and social forces that are transforming the human habitat everywhere; the search for new rural-urban configurations to cope with the demands of increased population density and a rapidly growing labor force; the relationship between security and development at both national and international levels; the problems of governance that arise in a complex and rapidly changing system. These clusters have evolved almost organically out of the broad research front established by the first MTP, and they indicate the direction that the second MTP should take.

This process of coalescence will enable the UNU, over the next biennium and beyond, to reduce the number of discrete activities and to consolidate its efforts. The institution needs to move at a deliberate pace into newly defined problem areas-- areas defined in large part by the findings of its previous efforts. It also needs to leave some problem areas behind.

When the UNU ceases to be active in some field of inquiry, it should leave behind strong evidence of a constructive involvement. One hopes that this would be recognizable in the form of a stronger capacity and a continuing interest in the field among the University's former collaborators, both institutional and individual. It should also be evident



in definitions of new problems or new perspectives on older ones; in greater openness to multiple approaches and greater awareness of differing views; and in a fearless appreciation and acceptance of the complexity, unpredictability, and vulnerability that characterize this era of rapid change.

The mandate of the United Nations University calls for a dispersed global system of institutions. With the limited resources at its disposal, the UNU could not establish such a system itself from the beginning. It had to improvise a network of associated institutions, and a dispersed programme administered from the University Centre. Now that the first research and training centre (RTC) created by the University has been established (that is the World Institute for Development Economics Research in Helsinki), it is time to take a fresh look at the role of the University Centre and the networks of individuals and institutions with which it interacts.

The view that is offered here of the evolution of the UNU as a system is necessarily a personal view. Ultimately, the function of the University Centre should be that of planning and coordinating the activities of the University as a whole. It should also initiate exploratory research projects and feasibility studies for new programmes, keeping constantly alert to the emergence of new trends and problems. A third extremely important function of the Centre, and one to which it is particularly well-suited by its location in Japan, is that of a communications centre. In this capacity it should service the networks and bind them together into a coherent system; it should help to meet the communications needs of scholars in the developing countries who lack access to international data banks and research centres. In fulfilling this role in communications, the University Centre will have to make use of advanced communications technologies, such as satellite links, audio and video communications, and computer networks.

The Associated Institutions of the UNU should continue to give it a presence in various geographical regions, provide it with a link to local constituencies, and participate as both receivers and providers of training under UNU auspices. The University should provide them with services and experiences that reinforce them as centres of excellence in their own



regions and beyond.

It is hoped that the UNU will be able to continue the process of establishing research and training centres and research and training programmes in those fields of study that clearly require a longer-term involvement of the UNU than it is appropriate for the Centre to provide. The exploratory research at the Centre should be like a moving spotlight, illuminating certain areas of inquiry for a few years. If after this it is obvious that much more work of the kind that the UNU is particularly suited for remains to be done, we should explore the feasibility of setting up an RTC or RTP to carry out the research and the training associated with it. The feasibility of doing so will depend on our being able to attract autonomous funding for the elaboration of this system. There is a growing interest on the part of governments in providing substantial funding for the establishment of UNU centres or programmes located in their own countries. While pursuing these possibilities, the University will have to reinforce its primary efforts to raise more contributions for the central endowment fund.

In the long-term elaboration of a decentralized UNU system of institutions and programmes, the importance of having a strong RTC in Japan becomes paramount. It should be the first among equals in the system. An Institute for Advanced Studies in Japan would be the intellectual fulcrum of the network of RTCs and RTPs, the place where integrated thinking that spans all the fields in which the UNU is active is the first order of business. The RTC in Japan would also be the point of contact with the UNU for many individual scholars and intellectuals from around the world, as well as the location of lectures, seminars and workshops through which the UNU could interact more fully with the Japanese scholarly community and public.

A decentralized system including different kinds of institutions, degrees of relationship, and time frames, involving individual scholars as well as institutions, requires new forms of management. Certainly, the heads of the constituent Centres and Programmes of the UNU will have to meet regularly to coordinate their programmes. The UNU will benefit from a flexible approach, that is tolerant of diversity but intolerant of over-bureaucratization. It will have continually to review its own



structure and organization, at the Centre and in the networks, in order to assure their maximum effectiveness.

Further development of the University's networks gives added importance to a central physical presence. A permanent headquarters building in Tokyo is not only an administrative necessity for the efficient management of the system, but also a crucial psychological necessity for the consolidation and recognition of the identity of the United Nations University.

It has always been easier to say what the United Nations University is not rather than what it is: it is not a conventional, degree-granting, teaching university; it is not a think tank focussing exclusively on short-term, policy-oriented studies; it is not a development research institute; it is not an international association of universities.

The United Nations University is a global network of scholars and academic institutions. It has evolved on the basis of the internal logic of its tasks and in reponse to a rapidly changing international environment. It is, necessarily, a decentralized organization, for decentralization is the only way to mobilize the academic community on a global scale. Its hallmarks are diversity, flexibility, and sensitivity to emerging issues. One of its major tasks is to contribute to knowledge of contemporary issues and to understanding of the dynamics and directions of change. Another major task is to augment the capacity for learning about the management of a pluralistic environment in a state of constant flux. A third task is building skills of research and analysis that are needed in specific institutional settings, but are flexible enough to remain useful as conditions change. In the course of pursuing all of these tasks, and as objectives in their own right, the UNU works to break the isolation of individual scholars, to stimulate innovative thought, and to serve as a forum for the expression of diverse views.

The United Nations University was envisioned, in the first instance, as a more or less conventional international university, with professors and students drawn from many countries, offering instruction leading to an academic degree. But the various committees, consultants and UN officials who drew the initial outlines of the new institution agreed



rather quickly that what the world needed was not a new body of degree-holders but a new body of knowledge. It had to be generated through research; people and institutions capable of using it had to be strengthened through training; and the new insights and methods that were developed had to be made widely available through dissemination. These imperatives became the central elements of the United Nations University's mandate.

When the Charter of the United Nations University was signed, an Endowment Fund of \$400-\$500 million was envisioned, to be built up with voluntary contributions from member states on the substantial base of the Japanese contribution of \$100 million. However, no other major donor country voiced any commitment to the UNU, nor even expressed much enthusiasm for it.

The economic climate of the years subsequent to the founding of the UNU has been consistently difficult, characterized by two major recessions, weak recoveries, fiscal overload on many national governments, foreign exchange bottlenecks, currency and trade misalignments, and violent fluctuations in international markets. The growth of the endowment fund has, in these circumstances, been slow and difficult. It is important to realize the effect that this situation has had, and may continue to have, on the growth and development of the UNU.

Rather than having an assured annual income of close to \$50 million from near the beginning of its operations, the UNU started with an income of much less than \$5 million, since even the Japanese contribution was paid in tranches. The fact that the University did not start with the large endowment fund that was first envisaged has radically and probably permanently affected the pattern of its growth. The smaller fund has served the vital function of guaranteeing the autonomy of the UNU, but it has not been large enough to launch the scale of operations desired. It has thus been necessary to proceed more slowly and in much more innovative ways.

Despite some encouraging signs of interest from governments and private donor organizations in the work of the UNU, it is only realistic to expect that funding will continue to be a constraint. For this reason, the



UNU will have to continue to be a flexible institution. Because we cannot be everywhere at once, we must make sure that we are at the forefront, working in areas where our presence can make a real difference to the understanding of pressing human problems.

The nature and shape of the global problems with whose study the UNU is charged keeps changing; the University must continually ask itself if it is still looking at the salient issues. Its effectiveness will be measured by the quality and relevance of its work, and by its intellectual and physical presence in various parts of the world. These three-- quality, relevance, and presence-- define the dimensions of the challenge before the United Nations University as it prepares for the second Medium Term Perspective.