
Developing the role of UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks

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UK National Commission for UNESCO Secretariat
3 Whitehall Court
London SW1A 2EL
United Kingdom

+44 (0) 20 7766 3491
www.unesco.org.uk

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Executive Summary

The UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks programme remains relevant in most cases and highly sought-after, with a near doubling in its size over the past decade. The programme continues to benefit both UNESCO and individual Chairs and UNITWIN Networks, however it could be significantly enhanced. To increase its value, changes to the management of the programme are required, along with a new approach to the utilisation of the network.

The UK National Commission for UNESCO recommends that UNESCO, in cooperation with existing Chairs and UNITWIN Networks:

- Use the network for global, multi-disciplinary approaches to complex problems, in addition to specialist advice on particular issues.
- Improve communication and cooperation with Chairs and Networks, particularly to support the development and delivery of UNESCO's work.
- Where capacity exists, formalise the role of National Commissions in the programme's application and reporting process to reduce the administrative burden on UNESCO and to utilise local knowledge.
- Given the strategic nature of the work of the Chairs and of the UNITWIN Networks, the reporting and renewal periods should be changed to allow for a more substantive assessment of progress and achievements.

1 / Background

The UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs programme was introduced in 1992 to advance research, training and programme development in higher education by building university networks and encouraging inter-university cooperation. Chairs and Networks are established to address one or more of three key roles: training, research and outreach.

The programme has two different designations:

- **UNESCO Chairs** are awarded to individual higher education institutions and involve academics and graduate students, as well as key civil society partners.
- **University Twinning and Network Scheme (UNITWIN)** matches colleges, universities and research institutions in industrialised countries with counterparts in developing countries to share information and knowledge in the development context.

Chairs and Networks are established by signed agreements between UNESCO and the host higher education institution. UNESCO does not provide funding, but expects host institutions to make a financial and staff contribution to the Chair/Network, including employing the required Chair-holder or Network Coordinator.

Demand for the UNESCO Chair¹ designation has remained strong since the programme's inception, with an average of 32 Chairs added annually from 2001–2011. By the end of 2011 the scheme had over 700 Chairs and 70 Networks.

1 For brevity, UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks are generally referred to as 'Chairs' in this document.

Current situation

In June 2011 UNESCO launched a review of the Chairs programme. A survey of existing Chairs was undertaken to assess their experiences and to identify potential areas for improvement. This was followed by a UNESCO Internal Oversight Service (IOS) audit of the programme's management, published in early 2012.² The audit concluded that the large number of inactive and obsolete Chairs should be addressed immediately, followed by management reforms.

Despite the current benefits of the programme, its full potential is not being realised; many Chair-holders and Network Coordinators find the administration and required reporting cumbersome and slow to respond while networking and consultative links with UNESCO are often lacking or inconsistent.

2 Audit of the Management Framework of the UNESCO Chairs Programme (IOS/AUD/2012/02 Rev.), UNESCO IOS, February 2012

2 / Programme management

Reform of the management of the programme is required to reduce administration, ensure the high quality of Chairs and to ensure that UNESCO's relationship with Chairs begins and is maintained in a professional and productive manner.

Establishing new Chairs and Networks

Currently, new applications can, on average, take two or more years to process. This is partially due to the backlog of applications,³ but can also be attributed to the review process itself. At the country level, preparing an application may involve a limited number of individuals, such as the proposed Chair-holder and the administration of the host university. Once the application reaches UNESCO however, the Section for Higher Education coordinates a review which involves multiple divisions and offices. These may include relevant Programme Sector(s) and field office(s), the office of the Assistant Director-General for Education, office of the Director-General, International Standards and Legal Affairs and the Sector for External Relations and Public Information.

UNESCO should examine how a more efficient, agile and transparent internal review process can be developed.

³ UNESCO IOS, pg. 4

This process appears to applicants to be obscure, laborious and overly long. Monitoring applications and ensuring they progress through the system is a large administrative commitment from the Section for Higher Education and a large collective time commitment from other UNESCO staff. This process can be improved by ensuring that fewer and fitter applications reach UNESCO, while streamlining the organisation's own internal review process. To address this it is recommend that:

Strengthen the review process at the national level – UNESCO can reduce the number of applications it receives and improve their quality by instituting an initial, country-level review process. These reviews can be done by National Commissions or a similar competent body.

Streamline internal review process – UNESCO should examine how a more efficient, agile and transparent internal review process can be developed. Improving the quality of applications which reach UNESCO will help in this respect.

Improve transparency – Applicants are often unclear about what happens to an application after it is submitted. UNESCO should make simple and clear information available to all applicants on the internal assessment process with any delays in processing the application reported to the applicant.

Reporting and renewal

The programme's reporting and renewal processes are interlinked. Practices in both these areas should be reformed to make them more robust and less administratively burdensome.

Regular reporting

UNESCO requests progress reports from Chairs and Networks on an annual basis, using a standard reporting form. To improve this process UNESCO should:

- **Frequency** – reduce the frequency of progress reports to allow for more substantive reporting and to reduce administration. UNESCO is currently considering requiring an interim report from Chairs at two years with a full progress report at four-years, which should be welcomed.

- **Role of National Commissions** – formalise the role of National Commissions so that where the capacity exists they can collect and review reports before submitting them to UNESCO.
- **Enforcement** – strictly enforce the reporting timetable. Renewal of an agreement should be linked to these reports.
- **Guidance** – publish a guidance note explaining what information is being requested in the reporting template and the expected level of detail. Reports which substantially vary from this template should not be accepted.
- **Utilisation** – use these reports to contribute to information sharing and to identifying potential opportunities for cooperation.

Agreement duration

The Chair and UNITWIN designations are subject to renewal on a two-yearly or four-yearly basis, depending on the category of agreement and the year it was first signed. The biennial renewal for Chairs has proven administratively cumbersome, does not encourage long-term planning and is in danger of suggesting that renewal is a ‘rubber stamp’ process.

UNESCO is currently considering implementing a four-year agreement period for all UNESCO Chairs and a six-year period for all UNITWIN Networks, which should be welcomed.

Assessing renewal applications

While it is clear what documentation is required for a renewal, it is less clear how renewal requests are assessed. UNESCO should publish the set of criteria it uses to assess renewal applications. These criteria could include, among others:

- the extent to which the Chair has contributed to its stated objectives;
- quality of progress report(s) submitted and the activities reported on;
- view of the relevant National Commission for UNESCO;
- replies to any UNESCO surveys or questionnaires.

UNESCO must also consider how the activity of individual Chairs relates to its evolving priorities and programme of work. As UNESCO priorities evolve, so the immediate relevance of a Chair will change. A balance needs to be maintained between the immediate ‘relevance’ of Chairs and the wider and ongoing value they represent to the organisation and the programme.

Consolidating the Network

The demand for the Chairs and UNITWIN designation has led to the rapid growth of the programme, while the number of dedicated UNESCO staff has been reduced by more than half over the past decade.⁴ This has led to a decline in the overall quality, level of activity and engagement of the network, with potentially serious reputational implications.

In addition to an initial consolidation process to remove obsolete Chairs, UNESCO must enforce closure of obsolete or inactive Chairs on a regular basis through non-renewal of agreements. The views of National Commissions should be solicited on a regular basis to help identify such Chairs.

4 Ibid. pg. 4

3 / Cooperation and network utilisation

There is a powerful argument that individual Chairs are awarded for specific reasons and should focus their energies accordingly, independent of other Chairs; and that UNESCO should use individual Chairs only as and when required (e.g. for specialist advice on a particular issue). Projects undertaken by Chairs are usually limited to that Chair rather than collaborative across the programme and UNESCO tends not to use Chairs as a group except under very particular circumstances (e.g. UNESCO reviews of higher education).

An alternative is that all Chairs are linked simply by virtue of UNESCO's own interests, and that in a world where problems are rarely soluble by single disciplines or sectors, cooperation between Chairs may be advantageous. The Chairs programme offers an opportunity to bring together innovative multi-disciplinary groups of scholars to address problems in new ways. Chairs can act as facilitators, drawing in a wider group of policy makers, professional organisations and practitioners in their subject area. Chairs are also willing to engage with sectors beyond higher education and have a wealth of experience in opening up academic expertise to other sectors.

Realising the collective strength of this network depends on improving cooperation among a number of partners. Activities need to be better coordinated and promoted, experiences and networks shared, and National Commissions need to develop Chairs as part of their overall strategy, while at the same time recognising the essential independence of academics.

UNESCO Secretariat

Recent external assessments⁵ have identified the need for UNESCO to improve the management of its partner networks. This includes the Chairs programme, where there appears to be no systematic framework for managing UNESCO's relationship with individual Chairs or Networks. Some Chairs have strong and productive relations with the relevant parts of UNESCO, but this appears to be in a minority of cases.

Partnership Strategy

At its 190th session in October 2012 the UNESCO Executive Board considered a comprehensive partnership strategy and a series of separate strategies for engagement with different partner categories, including academic institutions.⁶ A number of changes are required if the impact of these strategies on the Chairs programme is to be maximised. These include:

- The strategy for engagement with the academic community includes ways that National Commissions can contribute to this partnership through the Chairs programme including supporting applications, networking, information sharing and contributing to evaluations. These responsibilities need to be formalised and conveyed to National Commissions and existing and perspective Chairs.
- The cooperation modalities listed in the strategy are vague. More detail should be provided on the practical support the Organisation can provide and the expected contribution of Chairs towards cooperation objectives.
- No reference is made to three-way partnerships such as the United Nations University (UNU)-UNESCO agreement on the Chairs programme. These agreements have their own set of issues which must be considered.
- The strategy needs to be more explicit about the grounds on which partnerships may be terminated.
- The strategy's strategic objectives do not reference Chairs supporting the development and delivery of UNESCO's work, but focuses primarily on building the capacity of universities and promoting inter-university cooperation.

5 Review of Management and Administration in UNESCO (JIU/ REP/2011/8), Dec 2011, UN Joint Inspection Unit; Independent External Evaluation of UNESCO (IOS/EVS/PI/107) 30 September 2010

6 Follow-up to the Independent External Evaluation (IEE) of UNESCO (Part II) – Policy Framework for Strategic Partnerships: A Comprehensive Partnership Strategy (190 EX/21 Part II); Separate Strategies for Engagement with Individual Categories and Partners (190 EX/INF.7)

Focal Points

The UNESCO IOS audit makes recommendations on improving communication and cooperation, which should be adopted in full. Of particular interest is the recommendation that ‘focal points’ be established at UNESCO for each Chair. For focal points practically to support substantive communication and cooperation it is recommended that:

- Effective communication is reliant on both parties, with Chairs also bearing responsibility for communication and information sharing;
- An introductory communication should be sent from each focal point to their respective Chairs;
- Information on cooperation with focal points should be requested in Chairs’ progress reports;
- Focal points should be consulted when a Chair comes up for renewal.

National Commissions for UNESCO

As UNESCO’s formal link to civil society, National Commissions are well placed to contribute to the coordination and quality control of the Chairs programme. Experiences of National Commissions can be drawn upon to identify potential working methods and areas for improvement.

The UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) enforces a review process for new applicants to the programme and regular reporting for existing members. These methods supplement UNESCO’s own application and renewal procedures to help ensure only high-quality reports and applications go forward.

The UKNC’s review of applications operates on the principle of peer review and invitations to apply are advertised publically. Regular progress reports are collected by the National Commission, reviewed to ensure completeness and quality and submitted to UNESCO with a cover analysis. A modest commitment of National Commission staff time and resources is required.

The UKNC hosted an annual meeting of UK Chair-holders and UNITWIN Network Coordinators from 2007 to 2011. The group advised on the programme’s development in the UK, oversaw the annual application process and contributed to the review of new applications. This forum assisted with communication and allowed the UKNC to draw on the collective expertise of

the network. The UKNC will reinstitute a similar forum in 2013, improving upon the previous structure.

There are several areas for improvement in the UKNC's work in this area including:

- Consistently collect data on Chair funding, student intake, etc. as part of its assessment of the wider value of UNESCO to the UK.
- Develop a systematic relationship between the Chairs and the wider UNESCO 'family' in the UK (i.e. Biosphere Reserves, World Heritage Sites, Category 2 Centres, professionals contributing to UNESCO reports, etc.).

UNESCO should consult other National Commissions to collect information on current practices and to identify challenges.

Permanent Delegations to UNESCO

At present there do not appear to be strong communication channels between Permanent Delegations and Chairs. Opportunities to strengthen this relationship should be explored. For instance, Chairs may provide Permanent Delegations with an additional source of advice both on their specific areas of expertise and on UNESCO itself. National Commissions should facilitate these exchanges.

United Nations University (UNU)

UNESCO and the United Nations University (UNU) formalised an agreement in 1994 for the establishment of the UNU/UNESCO UNITWIN Chairs programme. There are now eight UNESCO-UNU Chairs and Networks, covering a diverse set of subjects. Cooperation should not be restricted to these Chairs however. There are over 150 Chairs and Networks in the thirteen countries where UNU is present alone. UNESCO and UNU should include how an across-the-board partnership with the Chairs network can be developed in their Plan of Joint Activities for 2014–2017. UNESCO should not itself develop the capacity to award academic degrees and other professional awards; while it is doubtful that the UNU should do so either.

Options

UNESCO has a range of possibilities for taking its Chairs programme forward.

i. Retaining the Status Quo

This option should not be discounted. The current system has not necessarily failed, indeed it has been welcomed and felt valuable to Chair-holders, and works well, especially given its relatively low cost to UNESCO. Nevertheless there is a clear sense that some problems do exist and that the programme is working sub-optimally for both Chairs and UNESCO.

ii. Improving the Partnership

One of the key problem areas is the lack of cooperation between Chairs and UNESCO. Although some Chairs work well with the organisation, others are poorly integrated. There is a danger that the sense of partnership may be lost with UNESCO's role viewed as simply endorsing activities which fit broadly within its remit or strategic priorities.

iii. A New Relationship

A more radical approach would be to introduce a degree of coordination to Chairs' activities within both National Commissions and UNESCO, using them proactively to address developing needs and provide advice on key issues. This would tap into the goodwill and expertise which currently exists, though this would need to be backed by a robust framework.

4 / Recommendations

To increase the value of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs programme, UNESCO should reform its management of the programme and forge a new relationship with its Chairs. To achieve this, the UK National Commission for UNESCO recommends:

- 1. Use the network's collective potential** – re-orientate the UNESCO-Chairs partnership to use the network for global, multi-disciplinary approaches to complex problems.
- 2. Strengthen the review of Chair applications** – use National Commissions and existing Chairs to undertake an initial review of candidates, ensuring fewer and fitter applications reach UNESCO.
- 3. Streamline UNESCO's review process** – limit the number of UNESCO staff involved in reviewing applications while developing a more transparent, efficient and agile process.
- 4. Reduce reporting frequency** – reduce the frequency of progress reports to make them more robust and less administratively burdensome.
- 5. Increase agreement duration** – change all Chair agreements to four years and all UNITWIN agreements to six years to reduce administration and allow for a more meaningful review of results.
- 6. Consolidate the network** – enforce the regular closure of obsolete and inactive Chairs, while consulting National Commissions regularly.
- 7. Improve UNESCO Chair partnership strategy** – improve the implementation of this strategy by formalising the role of National Commissions and clarifying cooperation modalities.
- 8. National Commissions** – support the role of National Commissions in developing the quality, coordination and focus of the network.

References

Audit of the Management Framework of the UNESCO Chairs Programme (IOS/AUD/2012/02 Rev.), UNESCO IOS, February 2012

Policy Framework for Strategic Partnerships: A Comprehensive Partnership Strategy (190 EX/21 Part II), UNESCO, September 2012

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This policy brief was produced on behalf of the UK National Commission for UNESCO by Professor Colin McInnes, UNESCO Chair in HIV/AIDS Education and Health Security in Africa, Aberystwyth University and Professor Richard Mawditt, UNESCO Chair in Higher Education Management, University of Bath, with Professor W John Morgan, UK National Commission Chairman and Ian White, UK National Commission Secretariat. The UNESCO Section for Higher Education and UNESCO Chair-holders and UNITWIN Network Coordinators from the UK also contributed to this report, for which the UK National Commission is very grateful.

The views expressed are those of the UK National Commission for UNESCO and do not necessarily reflect those of UK Government or the individuals or organisations who have contributed to this report.

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