Policy Brief 21

A National Experience of the Management of the UNESCO Prizes Process – Perspectives and Recommendations

July 2016

1/ Executive Summary

UNESCO prizes celebrate those whose work furthers the Organisation's mandate in building peace, security and sustainable development.

Often offering significant financial reward and media attention, it is essential that UNESCO prizes are awarded to the most deserving candidates, who will act as ambassadors for UNESCO and its constitutional values, and safeguard the integrity of the prize, the nominating Member State and UNESCO. A rigorous, open and transparent prize application process is central to achieving this.

This policy brief agrees with the conclusions of UNESCO's 2012 evaluation of prizes.[1] The policy brief will focus on practical considerations for National Commissions when managing UNESCO prize applications, rather than the UNESCO prize strategy itself. It outlines the main challenges that the UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) has faced when processing UNESCO prize applications, and draws upon a series of interviews with former UK prize winners, expert peer-reviewers and the UKNC's Accreditations Manager. This brief provides an overview of the UKNC's current and proposed approaches to contending with these challenges.

The main challenges are:

- o Access to information about prizes
- o Roles and responsibilities of the UKNC and prize administrators
- o Follow up and next steps after nominations have been submitted

The UKNC has attempted to respond to some of these challenges with:

- o **Centralised information:** UKNC has developed an online annual planner of UNESCO prizes
- o **Rigorous peer-review:** the UKNC has developed a rigorous peer-review process
- o **UK deadlines:** a separate deadline has been set for UK applicants prior to UNESCO's deadline to allow time for the UKNC's peer-review process
- o **Aftercare:** UKNC maintains contact with past winners

However, key challenges remain. The UKNC intends to use this policy brief to open up dialogue with other National Commissions to develop more effective methods and practices to increase accessibility and transparency to UNESCO prize applications.

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[1] UNESCO-IOS. *Evaluation of UNESCO Prizes*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2012.

UK National Commission for UNESCO recommendation:

- o National Commissions could benefit from establishing an online knowledge exchange platform to facilitate open dialogue to share experiences, good practices and to overcome challenges.
- o All candidates for nomination and nominating bodies should be made aware of the National Commission's role to enable access to key National Commission support and to improve transparency.
- o National Commissions should be able to make nominations for all UNESCO prizes to avoid duplication with other nominating bodies, and ensure that all applicants have access to the same level of support and guidance.

Without a rigorous and consistently applied UNESCO Prize application process, there is a risk that these prestigious UNESCO prizes will not be accessible to and known by a wide pool of high-calibre of applicants. This risks the reputation of the prize and of UNESCO as a whole, whilst preventing the best possible candidate from winning the prize.

2/ Introduction

UNESCO prizes provide financial and reputational recognition to organisations and individuals that make outstanding contributions to furthering UNESCO's goals in peace, security and sustainable development. The prizes serve to increase UNESCO and its programmes' visibility, by shining a spotlight, outside of UNESCO, on projects and people that are aligned with UNESCO's mandate.

For example, recent prize winners from the UK include the Arab British Centre that in 2012 was awarded the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture for its work developing, disseminating and promoting Arab culture in Britain.

UNESCO's National Commissions are responsible for:

- Promoting UNESCO prizes nationally
- Supporting applicants through the application process

The UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) is committed to ensuring that all UK nominations for UNESCO prizes are of the highest standard. In order to help achieve this, the UKNC has developed an accreditation policy, which includes a rigorous peer-review process to assess the quality of prize applications and provide support to applicants to strengthen their application. Only those recommended by the expert review panel will then be nominated by the UKNC for the prize.

The UKNC's accreditation policy aspires to be transparent, fair, consistent, neutral and open. However, in fulfilling this commitment, the UKNC has faced a series of challenges, many of which are outlined in UNESCO's *Evaluation of UNESCO Prizes*[2] which notes:

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[2] 'Evaluation of UNESCO Prizes' – UNESCO, Paris, 2012
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002161/216100E.pdf

"Many prizes do not clearly contribute to the achievement of UNESCO's objectives as a whole beyond a very specific target audience and the prize recipients. A number are neither highly visible nor highly prestigious [...]. Several carry reputational risk for the Organisation. Current coordination and monitoring of prizes needs strengthening and appropriate mechanisms need to be put in place to manage reputational risks [...] urgent need to revisit the prizes strategy".

This policy brief agrees with the conclusions of UNESCO's 2012 evaluation and focuses on practical considerations for National Commissions when managing UNESCO prize applications, rather than the UNESCO prize strategy itself.

3/ Challenges with managing UNESCO prize application process

The following section draws upon a series of interviews with previous UK-based prize applicants and expert peer reviewers and outlines some of the main challenges faced by applicants, reviewers and the National Commission when developing a UNESCO prize application.

3.1 Challenges before the application

a. **Information on UNESCO prizes is difficult to locate**

Respondents say that UNESCO's website can be difficult to navigate and find prize application information as the website is overly compartmentalised. Recent changes to the UNESCO website have improved the organisation of the prize pages; there is now a central page for each sector which lists prizes. Despite this, the general perspective of those interviewed is that you must already know what page you are looking for and the specific name of the prize in order to find information on how to apply. They explained that a clearer link to the prizes pages on UNESCO's homepage and in the website menus could improve the accessibility of these pages: the new lists are not easy to find, thereby limiting opportunity for browsing the various prizes available. This restricts potential applicants from discovering prizes that are relevant to them, prizes that are currently accepting applications or even prizes that are running this year.

When searching for specific prizes via an online search engine, the viewer is often taken to out-of-date, archived pages. Many UNESCO prizes do have their own websites, but as with UNESCO's website, you must have prior knowledge of the prize in order to locate this information.

b. **Information on how to apply for UNESCO prizes is often unclear, out of date or even contradictory**

Interviewees say that the information online is often unclear, out-of-date or contradictory.

A previous UKNC peer reviewer describes UNESCO's online prize information as "minimal", with "not much beyond the broad details". UK prize applicants interviewed say that the information available on UNESCO prizes is often unclear. One explains that after looking on the UNESCO website, they

were: *"Unclear, as a potential applicant, whether the prize was only open to individuals or whether it could be awarded to organisations".* Another applicant notes that information about the nomination process written in the Call was *"Contradictory* and *because [the information] is not clear maybe [potential applicants] don't bother [applying]".* The Call first says nominations "can only be made online", and later asks that submissions are only made through the prize's Secretariat.

It can be unclear from browsing the UNESCO website whether prizes run every one, two or three years, or indeed whether prizes still exist as many webpages appear to be out-of-date.

Many UNESCO prize applicants in the UK are small or voluntary organisations, without the resources or capacity to navigate complex or unclear processes. Lack of clear information deters suitable candidates from pursuing their application. It can also give the impression that the background to the prize lacks transparency posing a risk to the reputation of UNESCO.

c. UNESCO's Call for nominations is often near to the submission's deadline

In the UKNC's experience, UNESCO's Call for nominations is often announced too close to the deadline for submitting applications.

One previous applicant explains that: *"We didn't receive this Call until it was almost the deadline".* This limits the timescale within which the prize can be widely advertised by the UKNC and applicants can develop their application. One applicant explained how the late receipt of the Call can cause problems as they had to rush their application.

Announcing the Call for applications close to the final submission deadline also puts pressure upon and undermines the reputation of the UKNC, which is committed to advertising the Call among its networks and putting all applications through a peer review process.

d. Information regarding UNESCO prizes is not widely publicised

Upon receiving UNESCO's Call for nominations, the UKNC announces it on Twitter; on its website; and in its e-newsletter 'Network Link'. These modes of communication reach an engaged audience which is limited to those who have already connected with the organisation.

There is a risk, as outlined by one of the reviewers interviewed, that submissions from the UKNC are chosen, not from a vast pool of applicants, but instead from a "pipeline" of engaged applicants.

3.2 Challenges during the application

For the UKNC to support applicants through the UNESCO prizes process effectively, it is essential that the roles and responsibilities of UNESCO, the UKNC, and of the applicant in the UNESCO prize application process are clearly defined and understood to prevent duplication of work, and to avoid gaps in the process. Interviewees say that at present, these roles and responsibilities are not as clear as they could be.

a. Nominations can be made by other organisations and not just the National Commission

Nominations for some UNESCO prizes can be submitted by a range of other organisations and without having to inform the National Commission. For example, certain Non-Governmental Organisations and previous prize winners are entitled to submit prizes nominations to UNESCO.

This poses certain risks:

- Prize applicants receive different level of support from the National Commission and other nominating bodies so the quality of applications may vary.

- Nomination through other organisations could be seen as a way to be a 'fast-track' process, which risks undermining the prestige of the prize.

- Previous prize winners often work in the same sector as the prize applicant which may compromise their neutrality, posing a reputational risk for the nominating body.

Quantity or quality of nominations? The UKNC currently operates on the assumption that the purpose of the prize nominations process is to provide UNESCO with a shortlist of high quality applications. The assumption is based on the limited number of applications accepted by UNESCO per Member State, commonly stated in the statutes.

The UKNC is unclear about how this limit to the number of applications per country applies when there are multiple nominating bodies. If there is a limit to the total number of nominations accepted from each Member State, those submitted first may be accepted by UNESCO over those submitted later. This could suggest that the UKNC and other nominating bodies are processing nominations which will not be read. In the cases where the UKNC is not entitled to nominate at all, the role of the UKNC is undermined and unclear.

The roles and responsibilities of the UKNC, UNESCO, and the individual prize coordinators are confused and communication between these parties is fragmented. The lack of clarity regarding the nomination limits, UNESCO's objectives for the nomination process, and regarding where UNESCO should direct enquiries to, threatens the reputation of UNESCO as a whole as it reveals the inconsistencies of the system.

b. Application forms are not user-friendly

The UKNC and its applicants have encountered problems with unclear and non-user-friendly application forms provided by UNESCO. This can mean that the application appears inconsistent; the word count is inaccurate; and there are formatting issues regarding font size and spacing. As such, it can take considerably longer for applicants and the UKNC to process these forms, leaving less time to perfect the content of the application.

3.3 Challenges after the application

a. Announcement of prize winner

In the UKNC's experience, applicants and the UKNC are not informed by UNESCO if they have been unsuccessful in their prize application. No feedback is provided and this is a missed opportunity for further engagement with potential UNESCO supporters. The National Commission is not clear whether it is the role of the National Commission to inform applicants if their application has been unsuccessful.

In the UKNC's experience, there have been occasions when prizes have been either postponed or cancelled - after the UKNC has submitted nominations for that prize. The UKNC has not been informed of this change in circumstance.

b. Expectations of prize winner

The UNESCO prize statutes do not always outline what is expected of an applicant if they were to win the prize. For example, some prize winners who were interviewed were expected to produce a film on their work to be played at the award ceremony but they had not budgeted for this expense when they applied for the prize. Other prize winners can be uncertain whether they are required to give a lecture at UNESCO upon winning the prize. For example, various UNESCO prize statutes ask that: "Prize-winners, if possible, shall give a lecture"[3], which will take place at, or "in connection with the Prize ceremony".

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[3] Statutes of the UNESCO-Hamdan Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Prize for Outstanding Practice and Performance in Enhancing the Effectiveness of Teachers, 2014:4
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002318/231808e.pdf

4/ The UK National Commission for UNESCO's approach

The following section outlines how the UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) has attempted to respond to the challenges in managing prize applications, as outlined in Section 3.

a. Centralised information: UKNC has developed its own online annual planner of UNESCO prizes

In response to the challenge of sourcing up-to-date prizes information, the UKNC has developed an online annual prize planner on its website. This is a central resource listing all current prizes relevant to the UK, along with their basic information, dates, and eligibility criteria. While there is no additional information to what is on UNESCO's website, the information has been synthesised and centralised for ease of use.

The planner also explains the UKNC prize application process, the support available to applicants, and the application deadline. A previous applicant described UKNC's new annual planner as "a huge improvement [to when they applied for their prize] much clearer and more transparent for potential applicants"; another described it as "simply put and easy to find". The webpage also links through to the relevant page on the UNESCO website, saving browsers' time.

b. UK deadlines: UKNC sets a separate deadline prior to UNESCO's deadline

By requesting that all applications submit their applications to the UKNC four weeks prior to the UNESCO deadline, the UKNC has time to recruit peer-reviewers, and for the rigorous peer-review process. The overall quality of the application is increased with more time for critique.

UKNC's earlier deadline acts as a buffer zone in which to support applicants. One applicant described the UKNC's support role as "absolutely crucial […]. We wouldn't have had the resources to deal with a larger process, and it felt right that there was a UK process […] putting it all together as a package". Rushed applications and last minute submissions are avoided through this system.

c. Rigorous selection: the UKNC has developed a rigorous peer-review process

The UKNC's rigorous peer-review process ensures that applications are reviewed by experts from the appropriate field who are independent of the UKNC, and who provide recommendations to strengthen the application. The UKNC's peer-review process only puts forward applications of the highest quality to UNESCO from the UKNC. By explaining this process to applicants, the prestige of the UK nomination is increased: "It did feel like a cause for celebration just to be picked as a UK nomination."

The UKNC nomination process:

1. Applicant contacts the UKNC at the earliest opportunity to inform them of their intent to apply. This allows the UKNC to confirm eligibility, answer any questions and advise on applications. This also provides the UKNC with enough prior warning to identify suitable peer reviewers to evaluate each submission.

2. When the application is received, the UKNC undertakes an initial review to ensure that the application is complete.

3. For each nomination the UKNC identifies a minimum of three pro-bono experts in a relevant field to peer review the application. The reviewers are found through the UKNC's network of experts: a database of contacts enables these to be filtered based on their expertise. Reviewers are asked to declare any conflict of interest to ensure objectivity, although in specialised fields, this can be difficult to ensure. The Secretariat keeps the reviewer's identity anonymous from others, and from the applicant. They are guided by the criteria and guidelines of the prize and their expert knowledge of the sector/issues in question. Reviewers are asked to recommend either:

• Endorsement

• Endorsement contingent on further information, clarification, or changes to the current application

• Not to endorse

4. In cases where there is a limit to the number of nominations a country can submit, stronger nominations will be given preference for endorsement, as determined by the external reviewers. Differences in reviewer recommendations are reconciled by the relevant UKNC Director and Board Chairman, who hold final authority on endorsement decisions. These decisions are final, although applicants are entitled to an explanation of any decision regarding their application.

5. If an application is successful, a letter of endorsement from the UKNC is included in the application that is sent to UNESCO.

d. Aftercare: UKNC maintains contact with past winners

The UKNC meets previous winners to learn about the value and impact of the prize on their work. Prize winners are automatically welcomed into the UKNC's network of UK-based experts who are working to further UNESCO's goals in the UK.

UNESCO's 2012 prizes evaluation recommends that UNESCO report on "The use of the prize money as well as testimonies about whether or not the prize has made a difference for the individual/organization who received the prize" (UNESCO –IOS 2012:34), as well as the "Significance of the prize as perceived by prize winners" (2012:35). Both of these recommendations could be implemented by UNESCO's National Commissions, through the process of maintaining on-going contact with prize winners in their country.

5/ Recommendations

The UKNC recommends that other National Commissions share their recommendations for a more effective National Commission prizes process. It is essential that UNESCO prizes are awarded to the most deserving candidates who will act as ambassadors for UNESCO and who will safeguard the integrity of the prize, the nominating Member State and of UNESCO and its constitutional values. In order to achieve this, the prize application process must be rigorous, open and transparent. The following section outlines the UKNC's recommendations to further strengthen the prize application process.

a. Knowledge Exchange Platform for National Commissions

All National Commissions' experience of and information on UNESCO prizes can be shared using an online knowledge exchange platform, so that National Commissions can learn from each other's experiences. This platform will respond to the internal communication challenges within the prizes process, and to the lack of clear and easily accessible prizes information. Informed and sustained by National Commissions, for National Commissions, it will offer a supportive mechanism which can respond to the challenges faced around the world during the prizes process.

b. National Commissions to be able to process and support all prize applications

All potential nominees should have the opportunity to be nominated by National Commissions, to ensure that the same level of support is available to all prize applicants in a country. National Commissions should not be excluded from nominating, and applicants should be informed by UNESCO Secretariat and individual prize staff of their options for nominating. Other nominating bodies should be informed by UNESCO Secretariat and individual prize staff of the National Commission's role. Co-ordination and co-operation between National Commissions and other nominating bodies should be encouraged in order to streamline the application process, avoid confusion, duplication and provide equal support and opportunity for all applicants and nominators.

c. National Commissions to respond to outstanding challenges

The UKNC is seeking solutions for how to publicise information regarding the prizes among a wider audience within the UK, beyond those who are always signed up to the UKNC's communications channels. The UKNC is also looking for solutions on how best to respond to the issues surrounding the roles and responsibilities of different parties during the application process (4.2). The UKNC suggests that the Knowledge Sharing Platform acts as a space for discussion around these issues.

8/ Acknowledgements