<u>Event report</u>

The United Nations University as a Global University

With Konrad Osterwalder, Under-Secretary-General and Rector of UNU

Thursday, February 11, 2010, 3.30 – 4.30pm

In this special Worldwide in New York event, UNU rector Konrad Osterwalder outlined his vision for the future of the United Nations University as a fully fledged graduate school. Following a recent general assembly resolution co-sponsored by 112 countries, UNU plans to begin awarding Master's and PhD degrees at its current institutes and in partnership with local institutions within five years. The move will allow the organization to better fulfil its mandate as an interdisciplinary training provider and capacity builder in developing countries.

Background

The Rector began his talk with a brief history of the organization. Established in 1969 by then Secretary-General U Thant, UNU was conceived as a scientific think tank for the UN, to be engaged in research, post-graduate training, capacity building and advising.

Following a strategic review, the Rector decided to extend the reach of UNU's activities by proposing it become a graduate, as well as post-graduate, training provider. Two years later, the general assembly resolution required to allow this to happen passed on December 21st 2009, with the full support of all the other member states.

The United Nations University of today

Institutions
The Rector described the United Nations University as a global organisation, headquartered in Tokyo, with 13 research and training institutes in 12 different countries. These institutes range in size from 10-15 to 150 staff. UNU also has a liaison office in New York and one in Paris, the site of UNESCO's headquarters. In addition to these independent bodies, UNU has a number of associated institutions, the most high profile of which is Cornell University with which UNU operates a food programme. All these institutes are financed by the countries which host them, rather than from central UN funding, affording them an important degree of autonomy.

Research
The Rector stressed that UNU's research was informed by one guiding principle: sustainable development. Bearing this principle in mind, UNU's institutions cover topics as diverse as peace, natural science and engineering, yet share a practical, solutions-oriented approach to their research.

The United Nations University of the future

The 2008-12 UNU strategic plan referenced by the Rector in his presentation maps out an ambitious

future for the organization. It is focused around two main initiatives: the granting of internationally recognized graduate degrees, and the establishment of twin institutes.

The graduate school
Following December's resolution, the Rector said plans were already underway to make UNU into a graduate school. In terms of the implementation, he concentrated on two current options under consideration:

- joint degree programmes (one certificate awarded at the end of the degree); and
- dual degree programmes (two certificates awarded at the end of the degree).

Whilst both of these programmes would entail a partnership with a local institution, the first would be more preferable, though the legalities of such a partnership are still being explored. The Rector said that a key target would be to recruit 50% of students from developing countries, in order to expand the organisation's reach and make these graduate programmes real instruments for capacity building in the countries in which they are offered. In addition, students will be obliged to undertake practical work placements in another country.

In terms of teaching, the Rector said he wanted the degrees to be thematic, rather than discipline based, an organizational norm which he said disadvantaged traditional universities. He said he hoped that this approach would demonstrate that a closer union between the social and natural sciences is possible within universities, and it would also ensure that students gained a truly multidisciplinary degree. The Rector also proposed that professionals as well as academics form part of the faculty, to ensure that students become well versed in real world examples of their research focus in action.

As an adjunct to this, the Rector said that UNU was going to make **'systems thinking'** a hallmark of the new institution, a term borrowed from the world of engineering. He said that this way of thinking was not possible before the arrival of supercomputers; however, now the power to model complex global problems was within reach, this kind of macro-evaluation could occur and students should be trained in it.

The Rector envisaged that the graduate school be funded partly through global fundraising efforts, and partly through host country contributions.

Throughout, the Rector stressed that UNU as a small organization was not looking to compete with traditional universities. Rather, he hoped that by offering an innovative model of tertiary education, UNU would be able to inspire larger universities to follow in its stead.

Twin institutes
The twinning of UNU's existing institutes with those in developing countries is the second major part of the organisation's vision for the future. The Rector explained that all the directors of the 12 existing research institutes had been tasked with finding potential institutions to pair with in developing countries. The goal is to extend teaching and research activities to developing countries in a substantial and substantive way. Each institution will be thought of as one entity with two campuses and as such will have two co-directors, who will decide jointly upon strategic and funding decisions. The institutes will also work together on research projects and will submit proposals for funding jointly. In terms of operational funding, the host country in the developed country will be expected to fund 100% of the running costs of the institute campus, while the developing country will only be expected to fund

approximately 30%. The Rector recognized at this point that the expense of running such research institutions had been the major factor precluding developing countries up until this point from developing such a capacity themselves.

Goals

In conclusion, the Rector summarized his vision as a set of short and long term goals:

- establish a UNU fundraising arm in the next year to facilitate the vision's objectives;
- finalise twin institute structure in two years;
- have the first intake of UNU graduate students in four years;
- have a UNU presence in an additional seven countries in four years;
- have a large number of higher UN employees with a UNU degree in fifteen years;
- have one UNU graduate in every government in the world in fifteen years.

Throughout these developments, the Rector stressed that he wanted UNU institutions to have a strong connection to their host countries and form part of a local academic community, whilst at the same time retain an international perspective. He said that UNU's motto would always be to seek to collaborate rather than compete, and to strengthen ties with existing leading universities.

In his final remarks, the Rector asked that the audience support UNU's efforts, particularly its drive to raise the profile of the organization amongst the general public.

Question and answer session

The Rector then took questions from the audience.

How will the UNU achieve the diverse student body it is attempting to assemble, given the many barriers to entry to tertiary education for students from developing countries?

The Rector answered that though UNU would have to charge student fees, it would aim to offer a number of grants for gifted students from poor backgrounds. He also pointed out that given a number of campuses for the graduate school would be in developing countries, this would remove some geographical barriers to entry that students currently faced.

Do you have an idea of where you want to put your institutes?

The Rector said he wanted to focus primarily on Africa, but would also consider siting institutions in South America and underdeveloped parts of India and China. However, he reiterated that he did not want the locating of institutions to be a 'top-down' process, and as such, he would be guided by the proposals for partnerships he receives from the directors of the existing institutes.

Regarding the twin institutes, are you looking to create brand new institutes in the countries where you site the second campus or are you looking to partner with an existing institution?

The Rector said that as much as possible, he would like to work with existing institutions; ideally having UNU institute campuses on the same campus as a local university. The audience member specifically

mentioned the Indian institutes of technology as an example, and the Rector said that these institutions would be prime targets in the first round of negotiations.

How many students will your graduate programme have?

The Rector said that in ten years' time he would expect the UNU to have 2,000 students worldwide, using the figure as evidence to support his earlier assertion that UNU as a small organization, was not looking to compete with other major universities.

Will you be making use of online teaching in your degrees?

The Rector said that UNU in Tokyo already has a department dedicated to developing techniques for online learning, and this would form an important component of the institution's teaching.

How much will it cost a country to host a UNU institute?

The Rector estimated that a research institution run on a modest scale costs $2 million a year to run. He said that developing host countries would be expected to pay approximately 30% towards these running costs.

How many faculty members will a twin institute have?

The Rector said that he imagined two to three senior researchers at each campus, supported by teachers and junior collaborators. He expected that it would be more difficult to find funding for the senior staff than the junior ones because of the longer term commitment a funder would have to make to supporting a senior post.

Can you have three places twinned under your twin institute idea?

The Rector said there definitely was scope for three places to be twinned, in order that, as the audience member suggested, low, middle and high income countries could be linked.