



# United Nations University

Strategic Plan 2020–2024



UNITED NATIONS  
UNIVERSITY

# United Nations University Strategic Plan 2020–2024

Prepared by the United Nations University Office of the Rector, Tokyo

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## I. The UNU Strategic Plan 2020–2024

Rector David M. Malone was reappointed by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres for a second five-year term as Rector of the United Nations University from 1 March 2018.

In his first term, Rector Malone, with the support of the UNU Council, launched a programme of systematic change at UNU aimed at re-aligning the University's work programme to better respond to the policy needs of the United Nations and Member States. At the time, there was widespread recognition that UNU needed to become more responsive to the needs of its key stakeholders and better leverage its position as a neutral knowledge broker *within* the United Nations.

The United Nations University is a research organization committed to providing support for policy-development and decision-making on pressing and emerging global policy issues. Its approach to strategic planning is consequently different from other UN entities.

The UNU Strategic Plan ensures that the University is both positioned and has the capacity to provide thought-leadership and policy support in a variety of contexts. Institute-specific strategic plans spell out a specific programme of work in keeping with the mandate of each UNU institute.

The results have been encouraging. By integrating policy considerations in the design and delivery of research and capacity development activities across UNU, the University has reached new audiences and through them, achieved more direct policy impact than ever before. This success has also led to greater demand. UNU is frequently sought out to partner in policymaking, including at the highest levels of the United Nations' planning and policymaking offices, providing an objective evidence base that supports innovative policy ideas.

This new demand for UNU research and policy advice confirms the success of the previous strategic programme, as well as the need to focus on innovations that will ensure UNU can continue to deliver against a new, more ambitious set of expectations.

Over the next five years, UNU will remain focused on adding value to the key debates and policy initiatives concerning peace, development, and sustainability. Its community of international, impact-oriented academics and communications specialists will be central to the success of this mission.

### The UNU System

UNU is a heterogeneous network of research centres focused on a broad range of research topics, drawing on varying levels and sources of financial support.

The comparatively large and financially stable institutes have grown stronger over the past five years. Some of the smaller UNU institutes, however, have had to divert considerable local resources to ensure survival and have called on a significant proportion of UNU Council and UNU Headquarters' time and resources in the process. Over the course of this Strategic Plan, institutes without secure core funding must either strengthen or, in time, close.

There is a fairly clear correlation between the robustness of institutes and the availability of a sizeable endowment. This validates the UNU Council's decision in June 2018 to require a meaningful endowment for any new institute. The financial contributions received from sub-national authorities to supplement operational budgets, while generally beneficial, cannot be treated as a substitute for long-term endowment funding.

The current political climate also affects the sustainability and operating environment of UNU institutes, and the United Nations more generally. The high-quality advice and research produced at UNU institutes

does not guarantee unflinching support from governments that partner with it. Indeed, in the current climate governments may be inclined to single out United Nations bodies for criticism or efforts at defunding. The UNU needs to redouble efforts to earn governments' trust, but also draw conclusions where respect declines and not allow its mission to be undermined by shifting political climates.

## II. Objectives

Rarely has the demand for independent policy research been greater than in today's political climate. UNU is uniquely placed to address this need. For over forty years, UNU has provided neutral, objective, evidence-based research that inspires confidence and trust. Indeed, UNU has emerged as an independent voice addressing the most important policy debates of our time; debates that cannot afford to be overlooked.

As knowledge partners within the UN system, we connect diverse international stakeholders to generate and share research with a broad spectrum of publics. We translate this research into evidence-based policy recommendations and deliver it to those who can drive positive change, seeking to ensure that policy works for people, locally and globally. We further promote knowledge creation and exchange through education and capacity building programmes.

UNU also strives to bridge academic communities in the developing world and international policymaking communities, as well as strengthening national capacities through training initiatives focused on the most pressing and complex challenges to peace, development, and sustainability. The University has been especially successful in facilitating new collaborations between these constituencies; through targeted partnerships, UNU has provided academics and think tanks in the developing world with a unique opportunity to shape policymaking in the United Nations. These collaborations have focused on addressing a broad range of policy challenges including, the control of illegal drugs; the response to new migration flows; the promise and consequences of new technologies for developing countries, including their role in exacerbating or bridging inequalities between and within states; and, the impact of climate change on ecosystems, livelihoods, and well-being.

The 2020-2024 Strategic Plan renews the 2015-2019 strategic programme of action that set UNU on a path to greater policy relevance. It aims to make these earlier investments sustainable and, in doing so, lays the foundation for the organization's long-term success. Between 2020 and 2024, the University will be guided by the following four overarching objectives:

1. **Pursue policy-relevant programming:** by continuing to make policy considerations central to its research programmes and, in addition, actively shaping policy agendas through targeted and strategic collaborations.
2. **Invest in a dynamic, innovative, and diverse institutional culture:** by encouraging innovation in all dimensions of the University's work, which is undertaken by a diverse and gender-balanced community of scholars, communicators, and management professionals, and by promoting collaboration across spatial and disciplinary boundaries.
3. **Strengthen collaboration, communications, and visibility:** by leveraging the expertise and networks spread across the UNU system, promoting collaboration, impactful communications undertakings, and ensuring that UNU research meets actual demands.
4. **Strive for financial sustainability across UNU's architecture:** by addressing the financial constraints that would otherwise undermine ambitious, long-term, research planning, and ensure through participatory management practices that fundraising objectives are realistic, achievable, and complement other strategic priorities.

### III. A Policy-relevant Research Programme

Given the University's unique vantage point within the United Nations, **UNU has privileged access to and awareness of the evolving policy needs of the Organization.** UNU will focus on connecting these policy priorities with academic communities in the Global North and South that have comparatively limited awareness of the Organization's needs, and work with them in new coalitions to develop policy solutions. It will also concentrate on designing research programmes that integrate cross-disciplinary research approaches not commonly found in other knowledge institutions. This will not only enrich UNU's policy support activities, but also underscore its comparative advantage.

**UNU will be a reliable, forward-thinking knowledge-broker and thought leader.** Nowhere is this thought leadership more sought out than in the context of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. A considerable body of research has built up within and outside of the United Nations to support the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals; this has created many new opportunities for collaboration, but has also increased the possibility of overlap amongst research and knowledge centers, as well as contributing to an overwhelming amount of information for policymakers, who often struggle to discern useful research findings from the less relevant or practical. One way that UNU research will add value over the coming years is by exploring the interconnections amongst the Sustainable Development Goals and by highlighting the potential for positive knock-on effects through different implementation options. This type of systems-thinking is at the core of the Goals and where a great deal of demand lies in the policy community.

While the overall UNU work programme spans the full breadth of the Sustainable Development Goals, UNU's work is not constrained by this framework's political priorities and time-bound objectives. There is considerable value and interest in supporting complementary development frameworks that extend beyond the 2030 agenda—such as the African Union's Vision 2063, a roadmap for African development that captures the aspirations of African states—and to contribute to other visions of development post-2030.

**UNU's global academic programme for the period 2020-2024 will operate under three headings,** carried over from the 2015-2019 Strategic Plan and reflecting the UNU's overarching thematic priorities. These three main areas of work at UNU will primarily be covered by the following research institutes and programmes:

- Peace and security
- Social change and economic development
- Environment, climate, and energy.

**These three broad research themes include a number of more specific research topics,** several of which will serve as a platform for inter-institute collaboration. Emphasis on *new technologies* will bring together, inter alia, research on artificial intelligence, electronic governance, new labor- or cost-saving innovations, digital and social inequalities, as well as mobile and blockchain technologies. *Migration* is a second area of research that will bring together a critical mass of researchers from around the UNU system, ensuring the UNU is positioned to provide objective, multi-disciplinary evidence, analysis and advice on a diverse range of policy challenges related to human mobility. UNU also has significant capacity to address *water* challenges in different parts of the world and, again, from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives—from the study of waste-water management to water-induced migration. Cutting across many of these thematic work programmes are considerations of good governance. Institutional clusters are expected to emerge to support cross-institute collaboration on these themes over the coming five years.

**Under the three research headings, UNU also operates several small, dynamic postgraduate programmes.** These programmes offer young researchers an opportunity to gain hands-on experience applying basic research to current complex policy challenges. In addition, UNU research institutes operate a number of targeted capacity development initiatives, typically with the support of one or more local partners. UNU's teaching and capacity development activities draw on the strength of its research programmes and robust partnerships with local universities.

These activities are resource intensive and remain a small part of UNU's overall academic programme of work. Teaching activities are regularly assessed and only those that demonstrate that they offer

unique value for students, especially those in the developing world, and are not duplicative of training activities offered by other international and national knowledge institutions, will continue through 2020-2024. Advanced degree programmes, particularly doctoral programmes, will aim primarily at developing the capacity of researchers from developing countries, and strengthening partnerships with local research institutions be they in the Global North or South. UNU will not enter into partnerships of convenience that seek to leverage the United Nations brand.

#### **IV. Investing in Institutional Culture, Driving Innovation**

UNU also aspires to achieve significant changes in *institutional culture*. UNU's institutional culture is positive, progressive, and fast-paced. It is geared toward supporting new ideas and the individuals that shape them. Ensuring that UNU personnel work in an environment that is dynamic, innovative, and supportive will remain a priority for UNU's senior management and the University's governing Council over the coming years.

**A sizeable renewal of the University's directing personnel was completed between 2017-2019**, which resulted in greater gender and geographic diversity, notably a greater preponderance of women in leadership roles. UNU is close to achieving full gender parity across its academic and support personnel and is committed to closing the gap over the course of this strategic plan.

**This new leadership is committed to the priorities in this strategic plan and in fostering a culture of innovation.** UNU will move beyond a focus on gender parity to consider more meaningful ways of mainstreaming gender across the University. A specific focus for the coming five years will be mainstreaming gender in UNU research to induce new solutions to complex policy challenges.

**Innovation is embedded in all of UNU's activities, but more can be done to scale innovation across the University.** In the aggregate, the UNU boasts an impressive body of work, covering a wide range of disciplines and thematic issues. However, UNU research institutes are, for the most part, modestly sized and distant from each other. This has required that researchers and managers develop innovative working methods to overcome resource limitations and leverage the University's global reach.

A notable example is the *UNU Migration Network* initiative – an internal, researcher-led consortium that has allowed UNU to consolidate research on migration in a user-friendly platform that communicates the full suite of projects, expertise and insights on an issue of growing policy importance. **UNU management will encourage bottom-up initiatives such as this and reward bold ideas that can be scaled globally.** Meanwhile it will champion administrative flexibility to facilitate innovative thinking and support the rapid scaling of new ideas.

As an inclusive employer, UNU is committed to accommodating individuals from all backgrounds and supports the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities to ensure a workplace that is equal, fair, and inclusive. Also, **UNU personnel are committed to creating a fair, supportive, and diverse workplace**, and are working with management to ensure that UNU's core values are better reflected in the composition of the work force and the University's work practices. Over the next five years, best practices will be sought from within the United Nations, amongst civil society organizations, and from the public and private sectors. A new and notable area of focus will be on the development of policies that promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the UNU workforce. UNU will progressively introduce best practices to better accommodate personnel with varied personal and familial responsibilities and/or special needs.

**An equally important dimension of the UNU's institutional culture is tolerance for cultural, racial, sexual, and other differences.** UNU senior management and directing personnel will encourage constructive approaches to resolving differences in the workplace and ensure robust protections are in place and accessible for individuals with serious grievances. UNU will continue to work with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and the United Nations Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance to align internal policies, support mechanisms, and training resources to ensure that UNU's modest size does not limit the range of opportunities and resources made available to its personnel. These actions aim to create a tolerant and supportive work environment, free from all forms of discrimination, harassment, and abuse. To that end, the UNU is exploring the possibility of banding together with other mid-sized United Nations agencies to jointly procure and share common services, where it makes sense.

## V. Strengthening Collaboration and Communications

This strategic plan calls for greater collaboration and communication across UNU in order to increase the visibility and recognition of the University and its work.

**The UNU system comprises a diverse group of researchers with a broad range of expertise.** This talent extends across the five continents where UNU has an institutional presence. However, the disciplinary specializations across UNU have, at times, served as boundaries between its research groups. There is a shared understanding that this is an ineffective way for a global research organization focused on policy influence to operate. United Nations Member States have embraced a development agenda that stresses the interconnectedness of development priorities, and this has created a demand for inter-disciplinary systems thinking. Similarly, UNU will promote inter-institute collaboration and deeper collaboration with local knowledge institutions to ensure its policy advice is aligned with the expectations of its key stakeholders and reflects diversity.

**UNU's unique structure means it has the potential to meet current and emerging policy needs.** By improving collaboration across UNU and with partners outside the University, the University can substantially improve its reach, visibility, and impact. There are encouraging signs that the new generation of directing personnel are open to and excited about exploring new collaboration possibilities over the period of this strategic plan – whether through UNU-wide joint undertakings or by drawing ad-hoc on selected researchers or networks to strengthen UNU research portfolios

**UNU will also support structural changes to increase collaboration with other stakeholders.** The University has been increasingly active in at least one major UN hub – New York – and over the course of the next five years, will aim to expand its reach into additional policy hubs, primarily in Europe (Geneva, Brussels, Vienna) and Africa (Nairobi).

**Collaboration at UNU is significantly enhanced through communications efforts.** The UNU's first *Global Communications Strategy* aligned the UNU's global communications resources in support of key institutional objectives. Over the coming five years, this new and more resilient network of communicators across the UNU will play a vital role in pooling resources and expertise to connect institutes and researchers, to address knowledge and capacity gaps across the University.

**UNU communicators will be more prominently involved in shaping research outputs** over the next five years. Communications will be integrated in UNU research processes from the conceptual stage in order to maximise impact for target audiences.

Another area of focus for the period 2020-2024 includes **more consistent and coherent branding of UNU.** This will be supported by a new, integrated UNU web-platform that will allow quick searches of UNU's digital publications, leverage the communication assets and personnel of the UNU network to disseminate research findings, and ensure outreach is responding to *actual*, as opposed to perceived, needs and demands.

**Engagement strategies will also increase UNU's reputation and credibility** as a serious, dynamic, and effective partner for change by ensuring it is present in the most meaningful discussions at the right time. Targeted stakeholder engagement will require exchange with policymakers that play a central or supporting role in policy development; with scientific communities that can contribute meaningfully to the resolution of policy challenges but who otherwise lack access to debates and related policy processes at the United Nations; and, with Member States, international secretariats, United Nations sister agencies, civil society, and other active contributors in and outside of the Organization that share similar objectives.

## VI. Promoting Financial Sustainability

UNU is funded through voluntary contributions and does not receive any assessed contributions from the regular United Nations budget. Voluntary contributions are normally provided on an annual basis by host governments, though some institutes are able to draw on endowment funding. It is only those UNU institutes that benefit from substantial endowments that can operate with the assurance of medium- to

long-term security; these investments generate yearly income that can be used to meet operational and research costs. In the current political and financial environment – much changed from even five years ago – it would be imprudent to stake an institute's financial health on the contributions of a single host country donor.

Since its establishment in 1973, the UNU Centre (Headquarters) has benefited greatly from the generosity of the Government of Japan, which provided an initial contribution of US\$100 million for the UNU endowment as well as a permanent headquarters building in Shibuya-ku.

This strategic plan calls for **further consolidation of UNU's institutional architecture and a greater diversification of resources**. Towards this end, UNU will increase its focus on those UNU research institutes that are financially supported by their host countries, while giving due consideration to proposals for the establishment of new institutes where long-term funding is guaranteed and in line with the guidelines set by the UNU Council. UNU personnel will also be encouraged to work with their UNU peers to develop innovative funding proposals that leverage the unique range of thematic expertise and the geographical diversity found across UNU.

**UNU will continue to stress the importance of a participatory management culture**. Each UNU research institute benefits from the guidance and advice of an international advisory board that is composed of independent experts in the institute's specific area of academic work. Working with new management processes and tools, advisory board members have become more involved in shaping management decisions and priorities for UNU research institutes. This has generated more focused and constructive feedback on specific management challenges and opportunities for development and growth. Institutional objectives are co-developed with members of advisory boards and directors, fostering greater interest and ownership of an institute's growth and implementation strategies.

UNU will continue to **invest in creating spaces and tools that support structured and participatory management practices, and leverage innovative practices** from outside the University. It will also focus on improving the tools and strengthening the capacity to forecast the financial health of UNU institutes and anticipate financial risks. This will allow UNU to also more rapidly respond and adapt to different donor priorities.