

HABITAT UNI 2008-2021: A REVIEW

ANNEX 1 TO THE REPORT
LINKING UN-HABITAT AND UNIVERSITIES



UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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for Cities

UN HABITAT

FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

HABITAT UNI 2008-2021, A REVIEW **ANNEX 1 TO THE REPORT** **LINKING UN-HABITAT AND UNIVERSITIES.**

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This document is intended to inform strategy and internal discussions on university partnerships and the Habitat UNI program. The authors have sought to ensure the accuracy of the material in this document and followed due research protocols at the University of Melbourne. They, the Centre, and the University of Melbourne are not liable for any loss or damage incurred through the use of this report.

Prepared by the University of Melbourne and UN-Habitat, March 2022.

HABITAT UNI 2008-2021, A REVIEW

ANNEX 1 TO LINKING UN-HABITAT AND UNIVERSITIES
BY THE MELBOURNE CENTRE FOR CITIES
FOR UN-HABITAT'S CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING UNIT

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UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY TO UN-HABITAT'S 'CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE' ASPIRATION.

THEY CAN ACT AS DRIVERS OF CAPACITY BUILDING, INNOVATION AND URBAN CHANGE. THESE PARTNERSHIPS ARE ENACTED THROUGH A WIDE ARRAY OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS, ACROSS A VAST GEOGRAPHY OF COLLABORATIONS THE WORLD OVER. A REFORM AND ENHANCEMENT OF HABITAT UNI, AS *THE UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM OF UN-HABITAT*, COULD BE PIVOTAL TO REAP THE BENEFITS OF THIS MULTIFACETED ENGAGEMENT.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Information and data are pervasive aspects of the way in which we manage cities and how billions of urban dwellers go about their everyday lives. Knowledge-intensive partnerships are critical for urban development worldwide. UN-Habitat has recognised this seeking to position itself as “centre of excellence and innovation” and “a thought leader” in sustainable urbanization. Engagement with one of the prime knowledge industries, *academia*, is well recognised as central to this mission. UN-Habitat has collaborated, experimented, and engaged with university partnerships across a vast array of programs. Yet, this variety has to date lacked clear and systematic identification as to its modalities, challenges, and possibilities. This is where the broader report *Linking UN-Habitat and Universities* comes in, gathering evidence with the explicit task to provide UN-Habitat with an **assessment of both challenges and opportunities to strengthen university partnerships**. This annex to the main report is also takes a deeper dive in one such formal and explicitly university-focused initiative, that of **Habitat UNI**, as UN-Habitat’s “main mechanism for partnerships with academia”, seeking to input explicitly into the assessment and direction of Habitat UNI.

ANNEX OUTLINE

This annex includes several parts aimed at reconstructing the decade-long history of Habitat UNI and understanding what key lessons can be learnt, in order to enhance its programming. The annex first outlines the overall project rationale, methods, and approach for this study. Then it steps into summarizing the history of UNI starting with its origins as The Habitat Partner University Initiative (HPUI) in 2011; it follows its evolution into the UN-Habitat University Initiative (Habitat UNI) in 2013, and the subsequent period of convening and facilitation (2014-2016) especially toward the launch of the New Urban Agenda. Then it recounts the more recent evolution of UNI after Habitat III through various phases of reflection and

attempted reforms (2017-2021). Building on this story and on parallels to key lessons from the overall study *Linking UN-Habitat and Universities* this annex then provides a series of practical recommendations to enhance the role and operation of UNI, before offering an initial input into key elements of UNI’s terms of reference.

METHODS

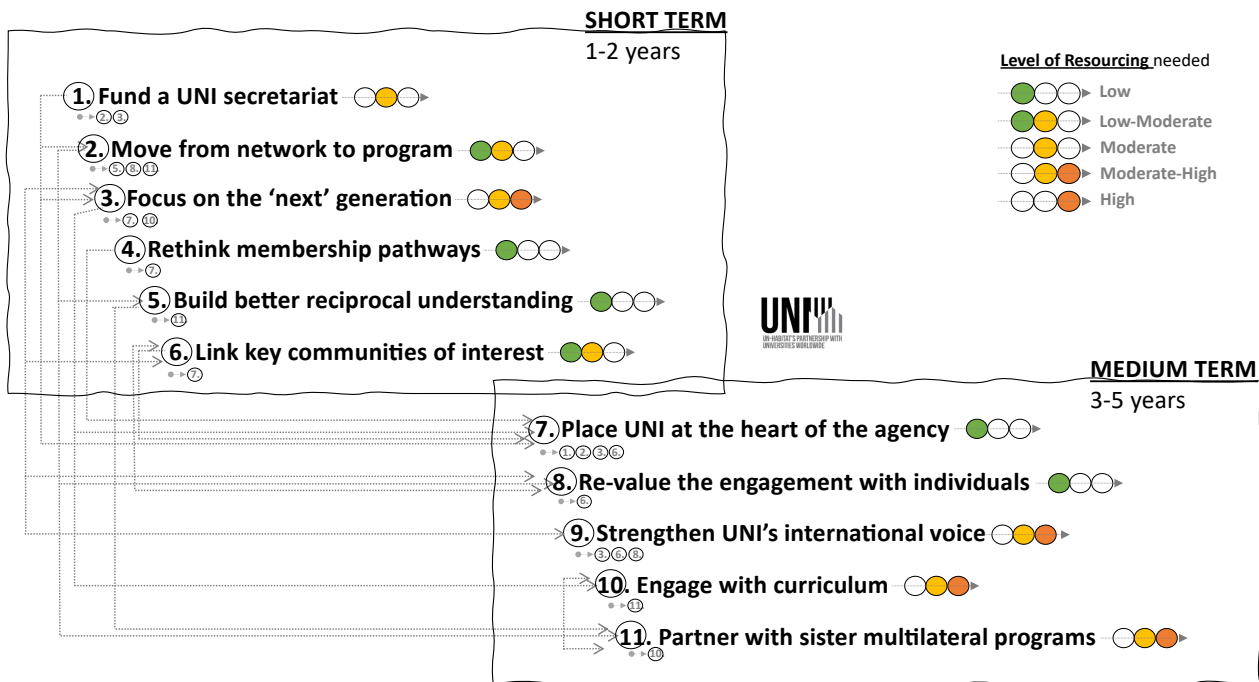
This project focused explicitly on university partnerships with higher education institutions (henceforth ‘universities’), and specifically on those formally set up by or with UN-Habitat. The study underlying the report was carried out between November 2021 and February 2022. It involved **five main methods**. First, a desk review of the relevant documentation available from UN-Habitat on the progress and development of Habitat UNI (29 documents). This also involved a review of 13 case studies of partnerships (summarised in Annex 2 to the report), further validated with direct input by UN-Habitat staff involved in the cases. Second, 12 anonymised in-depth interviews were undertaken, with key informants engaged with Habitat UNI and UN-Habitat-university partnerships. Third, three semi-quantitative surveys were carried out, inquiring about the challenges and opportunities of universities partnerships, resulting in responses by 84 UN-Habitat staff and 121 academics. These surveys foreground the overall report *Linking UN-Habitat and Universities* but are not reported instead in this annex, which is instead focused on UNI only. Fourth, these methods were complemented by 2 focus groups: one held with UN-Habitat staff, and one with Habitat UNI members from higher academic institutions. Qualitative and quantitative data generated through these mixed methods were analysed between late-December 2021 and February 2022, leading to the production of this report and its annexes in March 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HABITAT UNI

Analysis of university partnerships and the Habitat UNI initiative point to the need for a series of reforms aimed at enhancing Habitat UNI's capacity and influence. In particular, empirical evidence stresses, in our view, the need for shifting the aim of UNI from more generic academic exchange loosely in relation to UN-Habitat to a tight presence in the agency's core business. It calls upon UNI to project a clear identity and offer a simplified mission to those keen to engage, whilst sharpening what the 'ask' for support is by UNI and what the possibilities for fundraising might be. This would also, in our view, need a greater drive for attention and engagement with UNI beyond CDTU and beyond currently active members. To do so persuasively across UN-Habitat programs and a wider variety of universities, UNI would need to present a more tangible value proposition. To these ends the report outlines a series of 11 practical recommendations for UNI's operation in the years ahead with a focus on the short (1-2 years) and medium (2-5 years) term of action.

Our advice takes place along three core axes of proposed reform of Habitat UNI:

- A. focus the purpose of UNI explicitly as **the official university partnership program of UN-Habitat**,
- B. with its main activities aimed to **connect directly UN-Habitat programming and services** to university expertise and education, and vice-versa
- C. and its governance designed to be a **shared commitment by UN-Habitat staff and scholars** with a clear eye at institutional and 'next generation' engagement



VISUAL SUMMARY

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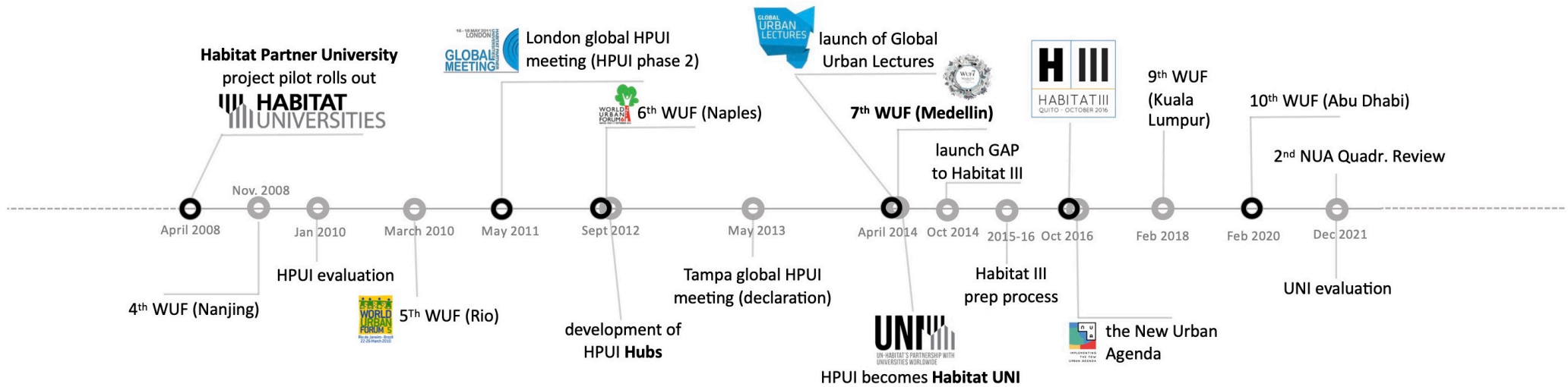


Figure 1: visual summary of Habitat UNI 2008-2021

1. INTRODUCTION

Habitat UNI has over more than a decade (2008-2021) of operations history presenting a prime example of UN-Habitat-university partnerships. This annex to the report *Linking UN-Habitat and Universities* summarises its history starting with its origins when launched as The Habitat Partner University Initiative (HPUI) in 2011 building on a 2008-2010 pilot program; it follows its evolution into the UN-Habitat University Initiative (Habitat UNI) in 2013, and the subsequent period of convening and facilitation especially toward the launch of the New Urban Agenda; and it recounts the more recent evolution of UNI after Habitat III through various phases of reflection and attempted reforms.

The history of UNI is already telling of its success in convening and in many cases highlighting the place of universities in the work of the agency. It also stresses the relevance of a formal bridge between academic world and UN-Habitat operations, and its capacity to provide evidence to, and in many cases concretize, the vast range of university partners of UN-Habitat across global North and South. Likewise, it also testifies to the relative self-organising potential and resilience of academic collaboration in urban research and education across borders. However, it equally sheds light to challenges pertaining to the size of activity versus size of membership of UNI, and the enduring internal resourcing problems that cannot go underestimated. It stresses the limits to dissemination of network knowledge both internally and externally, and the questions of identity clarity and recognition. These opportunities and challenges are leveraged in this report as a springboard for the more in-depth conversations of survey and focus group methods.

This section introduces the context of the project, set within UN-Habitat's emphasis on its role as centre of excellence, and the more specific background and methodology that led to the development of this report

and its annexes. In doing so it also highlights the framework of university partnership analysis used to frame the project (and suggested by us as a base for a more evaluative approach to partnerships for UN-Habitat) and sketches the analytical ground for the following sections. Core to this introduction is the importance that knowledge-based partnerships have in UN-Habitat work and the pervasiveness of university engagements that, as we stress throughout the report, can be a real asset to UN-Habitat's mission if managed effectively.

UNI in a knowledge-intensive agency

Knowledge¹ is ever more critical to the future of cities on our planet. Information processes and growing amounts of data are pervasive aspect of the way in which we manage cities and how billions of urban dwellers go about in their everyday lives. From the impact of digital technologies to community advocacy and business dynamics, and not least a turbulent time of information needs and misinformation challenges such as that of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, managing knowledge is increasingly central to urban practitioners and indeed researchers seeking to understand the built environment.² This intersection is now critical for as much scholarship as multilateral action.

UN-Habitat, as the major city-focused agency within the United Nations system, is deeply steeped into these dynamics. The agency's latest *Strategic Plan for 2020–2023* sought to re-position UN-Habitat as a “major” and “global” “**centre of excellence and innovation**” setting knowledge production, mobilisation, and delivery close to the heart of its mission. This has been repeated as central to UN-Habitat's purpose time and time again over the past three years at the very least. Current Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif has argued for the need to position the agency as “a thought leader in sustainable urbanization”³ at the start, and again at the recent extension, of her mandate. With ample knowledge-intensive efforts at work over the longer history of UN-Habitat, not least via milestone processes like the Habitat I, II and III conferences, knowledge collaborations

¹ In this report we refer to “knowledge” as collected information applicable to a purpose (either as ‘explicit’ or ‘implicit’ knowledge), whilst “information” refers to integrated/processed data, and “data” as a set of discrete symbols and signals. To that end we subscribe here to the continuum of data-information-knowledge based on degree of processing and application. To this end knowledge is not just a synonym with research here and encompasses also the exchanges of information and knowledge embedded in training, capacity building and expert advice. For more see Liew, A. (2007). Understanding data,

information, knowledge and their inter-relationships. *Journal of knowledge management practice*, 8(2), 1-16.

² Bai, X., Colbert, M. L., McPhearson, T., Roberts, D., Siri, J., Walsh, B., & Webb, B. (2019). Networking urban science, policy and practice for sustainability. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 39, 114-122.

³ The expression has been variously repeated in UN-Habitat press releases and can be found in the UN-Habitat Strategic Plan 2020-2023, available at <https://unhabitat.org/the-strategic-plan-2020-2023>

between the agency and other actors have repeatedly been stressed as key to its operate.⁴

The intersection of UN-Habitat's work (and aspirations) and a major sector in knowledge production, management, and circulation such as that of academia becomes crucial at this historical juncture. It purports to shape how the agency might engage with cutting edge research, training, and technology development, whilst universities in themselves reach progressively out of their 'ivory tower' toward more and more tangible applications of the information and data produced in the tertiary education sector.⁵ This overlap is the subject of this report and study.

UN-Habitat's university partnerships have already born repeated fruits in the work of the agency. UN-Habitat initiatives that to some degree rely on the support of academic institutions have ranged from broad sweeping international collaboration programs to ad hoc projects, applied technical support initiatives and convening platforms like networks and events. University partnerships vary far and wide across UN-Habitat programs like the Global Network on Safer Cities⁶, which seeks to equip local authorities to provide urban security, research at the basis of the Global Network on National Urban Policies⁷ program, which links UN-Habitat, the OECD, the Cities Alliance engaged and several academic institutions, to name but two. Similarly, the agency has relied on specific university units (departments, centres, and institutes) as well as individual academic consultants to develop tools, guides and other 'normative' products that can guide urban stakeholders, as with the setup of Global Land Tool Network⁸, a collaboration to increase access to land and security of land tenure, or with the global Urban Observatory program and its guidance on how to set up urban analysis hubs around the world. In short, UN-Habitat has initiated, experimented, and engaged with knowledge-intensive partnerships that

explicitly aim at linking and connecting with academia as a prominent partner of many such programs. Yet, this variety of partnerships has to date lacked clear and systematic identification as to the modalities, challenges, and possibilities of UN-Habitat-university connections.

This is where our study comes in, gathering evidence with the explicit task to provide UN-Habitat with an **assessment of both challenges and opportunities to strengthen university partnerships**. In particular, as detailed below on the project's Terms of Reference, this report also takes a deeper dive in one such formal and explicitly university-focused program, that of **Habitat UNI**, seeking to input explicitly into assessment and the direction of this initiative.

Report and Annex Background

UN-Habitat's Capacity Development and Training Unit (CDTU), has sought to reframe and enhance how the encounter between UN-Habitat programs and universities can be more effectively leveraged to drive sustainable urban development. In November 2021, seeking to address the challenges presented by a growing variety of UN-Habitat-university relationships, but also to garner the opportunities presented by sprawling relationships with the academic world, CDTU set out to develop a strategic review that would deliver a systematic assessment and concrete recommendations to strengthen the collaboration between UN-Habitat and universities. CDTU initially focused on strengthening the operate of Habitat UNI as a program. This effort stems not in minor part from issues emerged in UN-Habitat's *Capacity Building Strategy*, which CDTU is explicitly tasked for, and that stresses the need for an expanded, closer, and coordinated collaboration with universities worldwide.⁹ The Strategy highlights this need to: 1) multiply the dissemination and utilization of UN-Habitat's normative and operational tools and instruments in curricular activities, and 2) utilize the existing knowledge, research

⁴ For a review of this history of knowledge mobilisation between 1976 (Habitat I) and 2016 (Habitat III) see Cociña, C., Frediani, A. A., Acuto, M., & Levy, C. (2019). Knowledge translation in global urban agendas: A history of research-practice encounters in the Habitat conferences. *World Development*, 122, 130-141. Available at: https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10075280/1/WD_Habitat%20paper_Green%20access.pdf

⁵ McCowan, T. (2016). Universities and the post-2015 development agenda: an analytical framework. *Higher Education*, 72(4), 505-523.

⁶ See more at: <https://unhabitat.org/network/global-network-on-safer-cities>

⁷ Kundu, D., Sietchiping, R., & Kinyanjui, M. (2020). *Developing National Urban Policies*. Springer: Singapore. Also see: <https://unhabitat.org/the-evolution-of-national-urban-policies>

⁸ Augustinus, C. (2020). Catalysing global and local social change in the land sector through technical innovation by the United Nations and the Global Land Tool Network. *Land Use Policy*, 99, 105073. Also see more generally: <https://gltm.net/>

⁹ We take a wide definition of capacity building in line with CDTU's mandate drawing on the United Nations Academic Impact program that understandings it as "a process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and individuals need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world". Definition available at: <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/capacity-building>. For more academic review of the relevant literature on this see, amongst others, Black, L. (2003). Critical review of the capacity-building literature and discourse. *Development in Practice* 13(1), 116-120. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4029828>

and human capital vested at the various departments and think tanks of universities to increase the quality, quantity, and outreach of the capacity building activities of UN-Habitat. These themes will remain recurrent throughout this report and are central to our inquiry over the three months of project work to this end.

This focus was also complemented in 2021 by the launch of UN-Habitat’s “Communities of Practice” (CoPs), a major current internal knowledge-intensive initiative, has provided further impetus toward better understanding how knowledge mobilisation can be more effectively integrated in normative UN-Habitat work. Whilst recognising the centrality of university partnerships as per the *2020-2023 Strategy*, the CoPs have been launched as “spaces for new ideas” bringing together groups of UN-Habitat staff with “similar passions and interests” to support and develop UN-Habitat’s knowledge sharing and solution searching on emerging urban issues and discussions and to promote the tools and methodologies of the agency. From this point of view, they have been focused on reducing knowledge silos and sense of competition for resources, and increased collaboration and sharing. Their engagement with a wealth of external knowledge institutions, not least academia, has been clear from the start. Habitat UNI, as one of the most recognizable and longer standing university-focused initiatives by UN-Habitat, was to that end deemed as central to this review, but this investigation of UN-Habitat-university collaborations also sought to surface more broadly effective modes of cooperation between the agency and academic institutions. Hence, the deliverables set in the study’s Terms of Reference (See [box 1](#) in the overall report *Linking UN-Habitat and Universities* for a summary) were centred as much as on UNI than on wider lessons and challenges emerging from the broader context set by the *Capacity Building Strategy*.

Habitat UNI (henceforth “UNI”), as UN-Habitat’s “main mechanism for partnerships with academia”¹⁰, was launched in 2011 to promote cooperation between UN-Habitat and higher education institutions, as well as “to facilitate exchange and cooperation among universities globally”¹¹. The initiative was seen to respond to the needed to promote universities to become closer partners

of cities, actively engaged in urban problem solving, seeking to ‘close the gap’ between academia and practice, and encourages collaborative learning between universities and UN-Habitat. UNI also aspires to support the creation of the ‘next generation’ of urban leaders, managers, researchers, and practitioners. Our study’s scope was therefore to understand how to effectively leverage the work of Habitat UNI to this end after a decade of UNI programming. This was framed explicitly by CDTU to better align UNI to both the wider ‘thought leadership’ and ‘centre of excellence’ aspirations of the *2020-2023 Strategy*, and to gather key insights into what makes UN-Habitat-university partnerships valuable, but also challenging.

Key themes from the report

There are broadly five major themes recurring throughout our assessment as derived by the four methods depicted above:

1. Re-balancing and **reconciling individual and institutional-level engagements** in university partnerships
2. Focusing on **the ‘next’ generation of urban thought leaders**
3. Understanding how the location of these partnerships within **broader circuits of knowledge** and wider academic networks shape UN-Habitat’s university collaborations.
4. Recognizing both how to leverage academic expertise but also to **value education-based engagements**.
5. Tackling endemic and **enduring resource challenges** hindering university partnerships.

Annex Methodology

The project’s methodology involved both primary data analysis, of both qualitative and statistical nature, as well as extensive secondary data analysis of materials available through UN-Habitat. Our overall methodological approach underpinning this report has been that of gathering a wide input from both UN-Habitat staff and university academics. In the three months between the end of November 2021 and February 2022, primary material has also been collected through **surveys**¹² as part of the wider

¹⁰ As defined as per UN-Habitat’s Uni mission statement in current UN-Habitat materials. See: <https://unhabitat.org/habitat-university-network-initiative-uni>

¹¹ In the report’s annex 1 we detail the list of documents and materials analysed to piece together UNI’s history, with quotes coming from these directly.

¹² Three semi-quantitative surveys inquiring about the challenges and opportunities regarding collaborations with universities were conducted with responses by 84 UN-Habitat staff and 121 academics (74 individual members of UNI and 47 institutional members of UNI).

study for this annex's report (see main report for a result of the surveys).

Material in this annex has been compiled via a **desk review** of the relevant documentation available from UN-Habitat on the progress and development of Habitat UNI, focusing on key UNI documentation (strategic plans, public documents, consultations and review, presentations, and conference material) made available by the CDTU team. This involved a total of 29 core documents (listed below) and a variety of other additional materials like presentations, minutes and meeting reports, or workshop notes provided by the CDTU team, UNI Steering Committee members and UN-Habitat staff. At the same time, a series of 12 anonymised **in-depth interviews** with key informants engaged with Habitat UNI and UN-Habitat-university partnerships was designed to offer frank and confidential spaces for assessment of opportunities and challenges emerging from the desk review. At the same time.

The interviews (and surveys for the main report) were complemented by 2 **focus groups**, one held with UN-Habitat staff, and one with Habitat UNI individual and institutional members¹³ from higher academic institutions, alongside consultation sessions with UNI Steering Committee members and project review meetings with CDTU team. Qualitative and quantitative data generated through these mixed methods was analysed between late-December 2021 and mid-February 2022, leading to the production of this report.

A few brief caveats to our inquiry are inevitably necessary: to put an emphasis on universities, our study explicitly leaves out other knowledge institutions beyond academia, such as think tanks, knowledge-focused NGOs, and private sector actors (e.g., consultancies and knowledge-intensive firms). Yet we still seek where possible to set our discussion in relation to this broader reality of knowledge mobilization, as outlined for instance in chapters 4 and 5. Similarly, the study limits its inquiry to university partnerships formally set up by or with UN-Habitat, but we of course recognize there is a wider world of both non-academic research institutions involved in these dynamics as well as indeed a bigger context of informal university relationships and collaborations at play across most of UN-Habitat's work. The project also did not attempt to

capture the wider and more complex reality of UN-Habitat knowledge management across the whole of agency, or venture into the realm of tacit knowledge exchange.¹⁴ These limits were introduced to ensure feasibility of a project that was time-limited (to three months) and geared mainly at preliminary advice.

¹³ Membership of UNI is divided in 'institutional' members, represented by scholars acting as 'focal points' for universities formally engaged with Habitat UNI, and 'individual' members representing single academics acting in their own expert capacity.

¹⁴ See for instance: Venkitachalam, K., & Busch, P. Emerald Article: Tacit knowledge: review and possible research directions. *Journal of*

Knowledge Management, 16(2), 357-372.

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/13673271211218915/full/html>

2. ORIGINS: 2008-2011, THE HABITAT PARTNER UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE (HPUI)

2011: the piloting and (re)birth of HPUI

The experience of what is now known as the ‘Habitat UNI’ program spans over a decade of engagement between UN-Habitat and universities and is certainly telling of both challenges and possibilities for these connections at the outset of 2022. A brief historical excursus here is therefore essential to piece together key learnings to date of the program, and capturing voices, documents and activities that have characterized the program since its original inception in 2008, and more formal expansion in 2011.

It is worth underscoring that a precedent to the story we set out to tell here dates back at least to 2008. The initial prompt toward a more formalised program of university partnerships emerged from the recognition that University Roundtables were an integral part of the World Urban Forum events, and that academia had been repeatedly engaged in milestone UN-Habitat events like Habitat I and II. In particular, the roundtables at the 4th World Urban Forum in Nanjing and 5th World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro provided universities and UN-Habitat staff an opportunity to discuss elements of what a Habitat Partner University Initiative (HPUI) could look like. The HPUI was initially piloted between 2008 to 2010 as a relatively informal program engaging with universities and other stakeholders through the Habitat Partner University ‘network’. In 2010 an evaluation of the pilot phase of the Habitat Partner University Initiative was conducted. The evaluation was informed by consultation with universities around the globe and by the two WUF events.

At the time, the then ‘Habitat Partner University Initiative’ (HPUI), later known as Habitat UNI, was introduced by UN-Habitat to promote cooperation between the agency and higher education institutions. This was done in recognition of the knowledge capital and resources that universities could have contributed toward UN-Habitat’s goals to push for positive change in sustainable urban development. HPUI was aimed at encouraging universities to become closer to both UN-Habitat as well as to ‘city partners’, seeking to prompt universities to actively engage in solving complex urban problems, but also toward closing the gap between academics and practitioners not just locally but within UN-Habitat and the multilateral sector. It was seen to be a vessel to facilitate connectivity and foster collaborative learning.



Figure 2: HPUI meeting at the 5th WUF © UN-Habitat

After a period of more light touch testing between 2008 and 2011, UN-Habitat conceived this enterprise as a global interdisciplinary network that would be a leading partner of academic institutions in urban education and research activities, becoming a capacity-building mechanism to develop the next generation of urban leaders, managers, researchers, and practitioners. Moreover, HPUI was envisaged to provide a global platform to encourage dialogue and debate between communities, policy and decision-makers, practitioners, and the public to support cutting-edge interdisciplinary research that aligned with the emerging priorities for sustainable development.

Notably, UN-Habitat management has had a keen eye toward a broader ‘network’ approach from the get-go of HPUI. In fact, in January 2010, the UN-Habitat Training and Capacity Building Branch conducted a *Feasibility Study on a Global Urban Research Umbrella (GURU)* to be established within the UN-HABITAT Partner University Initiative. From this angle UN-Habitat staff proposed to support the building of “an international urban research network bringing together Habitat Partner University members and other interested parties”

As part of this network, universities and university-led associations could become full ‘institutional members’, while individuals associated with universities could become ‘individual members’ – a format that persists to date in the current (2022) shape of Habitat UNI. The partners who signed up as individual or institutional HPUI members would agree to promote sustainable urban development locally, nationally, and globally. Additionally, a Steering Committee, which is still in place, was instituted to provide strategic guidance, develop a work plan, and decide work areas across regions. The Steering Committee would meet twice a year to highlight the initiative's

achievements and discuss the possible obstacles that hindered the accomplishment of outcomes.



Figure 3: 2011's HPUI London meeting © UN-Habitat

In May 2011, a workshop to discuss the interrelationship of the HPUI and urban researchers was carried out in London. In the event, participants discussed which aspects of urban research could be strengthened by the HPUI and how the respective stakeholders involved in urban research could contribute to HPUI's agenda. As a result, the Initiative's purpose, mission, and goals were introduced, as well as its next steps and actions. Within the HPUI, and in close collaboration with Global Research Network on Human Settlements (HS-Net), UN-Habitat proposed supporting an international urban research network. This network would bring together Habitat Partner University members and other interested parties, serving as a bridge between the North and South universities to provide a platform for original and innovative action research. The network would have links to existing networks such as Cities Alliance, the World Bank, and existing UN-Habitat networks.

Initially, the work of HPUI was centred around five pillars, with the pillars of education and knowledge achieving greater visibility:

1. Education: This pillar focused on generating partnerships that strengthened the curricula of universities to incorporate pivotal topics in sustainable urban development, providing partners with tools and opportunities to improve their educational materials. In addition, the goal was to establish university exchanges and experiential learning. In its flagship initiative, this pillar sought to integrate modules on climate change into existing programs.
2. Research: This pillar was established to build an international urban research network with an interdisciplinary orientation, responding to emerging urban issues from the local to the global level. The objective of the research network was to strengthen communication, exchange, innovation, and

capacity-building among member universities and bridge the gap between research and practice.

3. Professional development: This pillar focused on aligning university work and learning around sustainable urban development with practical, real-life problems, training students, local governments, communities, the private sector, and NGOs on issues of local relevance.
4. Policy advice: This pillar pursued establishing a network fostering inter-institutional dialogue and facilitating collaborations between universities and local and national governments.
5. Knowledge management: This pillar focused on developing knowledge materials on sustainable urban development and collaborating with other urban networks to disseminate those materials.

In addition, the Initiative identified six priority areas within the sustainable urban development agenda to focus its efforts:

1. Better urban planning and design for a rapidly urbanizing world
2. Risk reduction and rehabilitation, promoting resilient cities
3. Urban economy and livelihoods
4. Urban land, legislation and good governance for future cities
5. Essential urban services in a flexible and adaptive urban infrastructure
6. Slum upgrading, affordable housing, and public space



Figure 4: HPUI meeting at the 6th WUF © UN-Habitat

At the time of its inception, the six priority areas of the HPUI did not parallel UN-Habitat's then-five lines of work.¹⁵ Instead, the HPUI was established more generally as part of UN-Habitat's efforts to generate partnerships, strengthen human resources and knowledge management. Eventually, HPUI aligned to an additional sixth area of UN-Habitat focus introduced to strengthen results-based management, enhance communication and skills, and improve financial, human resource, and knowledge management systems. In particular, the Initiative did not envisage targeting the six priority areas simultaneously or in all regions. Instead, it was agreed that the Steering Committee would select areas and regions of work based on the World Urban Campaign, World Habitat Day, the World Urban Forum or the flagship reports of UN-Habitat. Additionally, the Committee would propose regional and thematic hubs that would be hosted by partner universities.

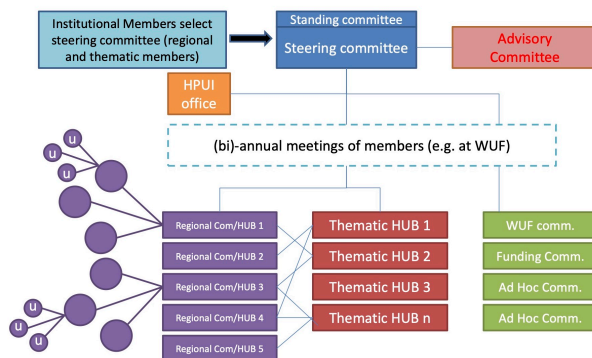


Figure 5: HPUI's planned structure in 2011 © UN-Habitat

To keep the network active, one of the first actions was the design of a web page where the members and activities of the Initiative were updated. The purpose of this page was to serve as the primary source of communication for the Initiative and strengthen the HPUI's brand. Nonetheless, although the web page was initially highly successful in keeping up to date the Initiative's activities and communicating the Initiative's results, this is not the case today. Maintaining constant communication was something that the Initiative, by its own admission, struggled to achieve for quite some time. This was perhaps most relevantly the downside of HPUI lacking resources dedicated to coordination and communication.

From the get-go HPUI also had to confront a landscape of UN-Habitat-university engagement that was far from lacking other venues of exchange. For instance, when the HPUI was created, another initiative was working towards similar goals, the Urban Planning and Design Laboratory initiative, which later changed its name to Urban LAB. The LAB also sought to facilitate collaboration between partners to develop tangible, catalytic, and transformative solutions to complex urban challenges in developed, developing, and emerging countries. Nevertheless, unlike the HPUI, the LAB developed tailored partnerships to define and implement multi-scalar projects and programs; the LAB is still active with several projects in its pipeline. Another initiative in force at the time of the birth of the HPUI was the Cities and Climate Change Initiative (CCCI). This initiative sought to mobilize and accelerate global action on the issue of climate change in cities. Like the HPUI, the CCCI sought to form coalitions, only in this case with city governments in emerging and developing countries to address the climate change challenges. Currently, this has been presented in many cases as one of the agency's flagship initiatives, stressing as with several other examples the continuous co-existence of multiple networks of engagement and exchange within which university take part.

In 2012 at 6th World Urban Forum held in Naples, Italy, HPUI's Steering Committee introduced 'thematic hubs', each one led by a particular university. The hubs were defined as consortia of universities, or sub-networks HPUI, that agreed to work on the same thematic priority under the principles of mutual collaboration, exchange, and learning, producing outputs that strengthen the role of universities in forwarding sustainable urban development. Although this work model aimed to increase specialization and results by area, the fact that the coordination of activities was decentralized generated heterogeneity in each of the hub's results and level of activity, which persists to date.

The initial eight hubs were:

- Informal Urbanism: Hosted by the University of Hannover, Germany
- Urban Governance: Hosted by London Metropolitan University, UK
- Climate Change: Hosted by Makerere University, Uganda

¹⁵ In 2011, the work of UN-Habitat was structured around five areas: 1) effective advocacy, monitoring, and partnerships, 2) participatory planning, management, and governance, 3) promotion of pro-poor land

and housing, 4) environmentally sound basic urban infrastructure and services, and 5) strengthened human settlements finance systems.

- Food Security: Hosted by Newcastle University, UK
- Urban Futures: Hosted by University of South Florida, US
- Gender Hub: Hosted by National University of Cordoba, Argentina
- Local heritage: Hosted by University of Napoli Federico II, Italy
- Compact Cities: Hosted by KTH Stockholm University, Sweden

In 2013, HPUI held its second Global Meeting on May 2013 at the University of South Florida's Patel College of Global Sustainability. This was imagined to kick off a biennial series that would meet in the years in between World Urban Fora. Participants representing 40 universities from 23 countries gathered to discuss and agree on strengthening institutional collaboration to address the challenges and opportunities of rapid urbanization and the cooperation with UN-Habitat.

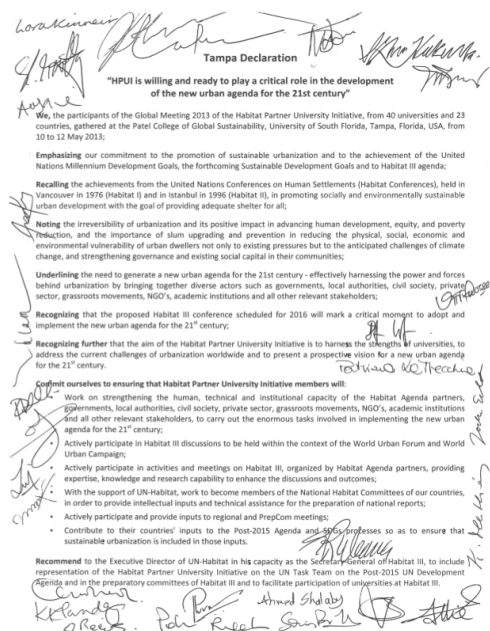


Figure 6: HPUI's "Tampa Declaration" © UN-Habitat

The coordinators of different thematic hubs, namely Urban Futures, Urban Governance, Informal Urbanism, Food Security, and Climate Change, presented their respective hubs' content and goals.

Of course, a thematic Hub approach to partnering with universities with a network of decentralised 'centres' for topically focused collaboration was not, and has not since, been unprecedented in the UN system. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is the WHO Collaborating Centres program by the World Health Organisation.

Dating back to 1947 and 1949, this program has seen the designation of 'centres' as institutions such as research institutes and hubs, parts of universities, which are designated by the Director-General to carry out activities in support of WHO's programmes. The program has been broadly successful and widespread across Global North and South, with presently over 800 WHO collaborating centres in over 80 Member States working with WHO on areas such as nursing, occupational health, communicable diseases, nutrition, mental health, chronic diseases, and health technologies. Designation of the centres is independent of financial support being given to the institution by WHO, and functions of the WHO collaborating centres are diverse and often very bespoke to the specific theme, ranging from training, dissemination, database development to review, piloting and collaborative innovation. The value proposition of this program at WHO has been that of allowing the Organisation to gain access to "top centres worldwide and the institutional capacity to ensure the scientific validity of global health work". In reverse, designation as WHO collaborating centres provides institutions with "enhanced visibility and recognition by national authorities", opportunities for them to "exchange information and develop technical cooperation with other institutions, in particular at international level", and to "mobilize additional and sometimes important resources from funding partners".

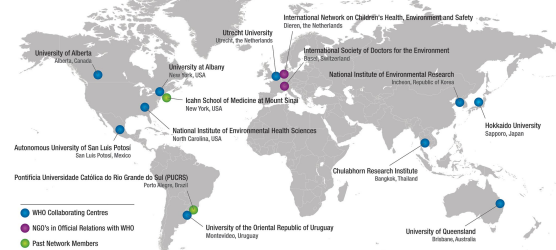


Figure 7: example of a WHO Collaborating Centres network (Children's Environmental Health) © NIH

In 2000, the program even evolved to test (currently three) networks of WHO collaborating centres as sub-networks to the overall program, which continues to attract attention and funding. From this point of view the launch of Hubs under HPUI was potentially a sound step change in size of work, capacity to reach into funded partnerships and ability to set up an ongoing long-term base of networked pivots for UN-Habitat-university collaboration.

2. EVOLUTION: 2013-2015, FROM HPUI TO ‘HABITAT UNI’

The UN-Habitat University Initiative (Habitat UNI)

Until 2013, the HPUI worked around the five pillars previously mentioned. However, in 2014, HPUI was reformed into what became known as the UN-Habitat University Initiative (Habitat UNI), as the Initiative redefined its focus and sought to better leverage the network established to date. This was predominantly in direct response to UN-Habitat’s launch of its six-year strategic plan for 2014-2019, approved by the Governing Council of UN-Habitat during its twenty-fourth session.

Habitat UNI emerged with the objectives of 1) promoting global awareness of what was happening in higher education institutions in different contexts, 2) providing connections between universities and the practical work of UN-Habitat, and 3) facilitating connectivity with other partners on the UN-Habitat agenda, including governments and civil society. Similar to UN-Habitat’s three-legged approach on urban legislation, urban planning and design, and urban finance and economy, UNI’s objectives focused on reducing the gap between the work of the universities and the solution of the most pressing urban problems, aiming to foster a transition towards sustainable cities.

To encourage the potential of universities as active transformers of cities, the Initiative’s previous pillars were replaced by four lines of work:

- a) Improve the quality of local education
- b) Disseminate knowledge worldwide
- c) Anchor university work in real-life contexts, responding to current urgent urban problems
- d) Use applied research through active university-city collaborations

Up to 2014, the number of individual partners involved with UNI had steadily increased from 1,336 in 2013 to 1,473. Likewise, the number of university members grew from 148 in 2013 to 162 in 2014. Furthermore, as part of the global dissemination of information line of work UNI saw the launch of the Global Urban Lectures program.

These were conceived as a series of lectures in video format, launched in April 2014, to provide a snapshot into critical areas of UN-Habitat work through the voices of key experts in the field, with explicit participation of key UNI

voices. The lectures were thus ‘taught’ by UN-Habitat staff members, university professors, expert groups, government officials, members of NGOs, and private sector leaders, resulting perhaps in a broader catchment of voices than the UNI network itself. They were designed to demonstrate a robust evidence-based analysis of a given problem and the issues at stake, identifying proposals to address those problems and providing examples of how those proposals work, are tested, or implemented.



Figure 8: a sample of the first season of the Global Urban Lectures © UN-Habitat

Notably, even though Habitat UNI variously described by UN-Habitat staff the Lectures as a ‘series of MOOCs’ (Massive Open Online Courses), it is important to mention that this resource has to date remained mainly a series of YouTube-based videos, with an approximate duration of 15 minutes each, thus not providing the level of interactivity, access or learning materials that a traditional MOOC offers to its attendees. For instance, courses do not make available individualized guidance, assignments, limiting their scope from capacity-building tools to a knowledge dissemination strategy only. More recently, the Global Urban Lectures have been used as components in non-interactive MOOCs focused on the New Urban Agenda. The NUA “online crash course” kicking off in 2021 has more recently leveraged relevant segments of 11 Global Urban Lectures videos, which have been used by UN-Habitat and a consultant delivery partner to strengthen substantive sections of the course such as housing and slum upgrading, waste management, urban

density and biodiversity and ecosystem conservation.¹⁶ Yet at the time of compiling this report these resources remain in the format of “self-paced courses”, not interactive capacity building programs or interactive MOOCs¹⁷

Nevertheless, to quite some degree the videos could be seen a success in terms of the audience they have reached. The Lectures are one of the resources with the most visibility within the Initiative, available online at the UN-Habitat YouTube channel. After one year of being launched, in 2015, the Global Urban Lecture Series had become one of UN-Habitat's most far-reaching learning initiatives, getting to 50,000 views by the end of the year and with solid recognition across a wide spectrum of academic environments.

In 2015, the number of Habitat UNI's university partners further increased to 187. In addition, during this year UN-Habitat published the "Sustainable Building Design Manual for Tropical Countries," which several partner universities noted to adopt as textbook, expanding the study and application of sustainability concepts in the construction sector. 2015 also saw an attempt to increase the shared material available to network partners. The following year, in 2016, 40 university partners had uploaded their experiences collaborating with cities into the UNI online portal, expanding the lessons learned and practical knowledge to the network. By the end of 2016, UNI had grown to 193 institutional members and 1800 individual members.

On the 20th of October 2016, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) took place in Quito, Ecuador. Habitat III was the first UN global summit after adopting the 2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, offering a unique opportunity to discuss the critical challenge of how cities, towns, and villages are planned and managed to fulfil their role as drivers of sustainable development. Importantly, the Habitat III process saw UN-Habitat coordinating a wide array of university partnerships geared toward feeding into the drafting of the New Urban Agenda and the preparatory work leading to the Quito conference, not least with wide input from university experts. For instance, two of the 10 ‘policy units’ convening the key themes of the NUA were led respectively by the London School of Economics LSE Cities

centre (for urban governance) and University College London’s DPU department (for urban economic development). At the same time many academics represented in UNI took part in the deliberations of the General Assembly of Partners (GAP), a special initiative of the World Urban Campaign representing key interest groups (including academia) engaged with UN-Habitat, which took wide part in lobbying and advising on the New Urban Agenda. Here several UNI individual partners, not least the sitting president of GAP as a UNI Steering Committee member, played an important part in feeding academic insight into the NUA process.



Figure 9: UNI Hubs as of Habitat III © UN-Habitat

Additionally, UNI was also used as a vehicle for purpose specific input to facilitate institutional cooperation between UN-Habitat and universities in and around the Habitat III process. This was for instance the case of the Safer Cities Hub, set up as a time-limited initiative in explicit support of the integration of university expertise, UN-Habitat programming (the Global Network of Safer Cities) and the Habitat III process. It was hosted by University College London (UCL) and UN-Habitat’s Safer Cities Programme, supported financially by UCL’s for a set of bespoke initiatives like a review of women’s role in the design of safer cities, or of smart city strategies and their engagement with the ‘right to the city’, or indeed providing support for the drafting of a Habitat III Safer Cities ‘Issue Paper’ also feeding into the drafts of the NUA, whilst convening a series of conversations about safety in cities. Whilst involving a number of other multilateral institutions (e.g., the World Bank urban and resilience

¹⁶ Available at:
<https://learn.urbanagendaplatform.org/course/view.php?id=18>

¹⁷ Lacking for instance user forums or social media discussions to support community interactions.

practice), private sector (e.g. French security group Thales or IBM) and a small set of universities beyond UCL, the Hub was only activated between late-2015 and mid-2017, presenting an example of a bespoke Hub initiative but also of a reality that did not roll out entirely along the UNI lines, and that confronted issues of resource provision as much as of wider buy in.

In the meantime, during the Habitat III Conference, UN-Habitat specified that UNI would continue producing the Global Urban Learning series; consolidating the existing UNI portal as a premier knowledge exchange platform, creating a fund to support the establishment of UN-Habitat Chairs in the universities, chiefly in those engaged in concrete projects with cities and communities. The Chairs would be figures based at universities that improved research, teaching, knowledge exchange, and the development of a new curriculum in response to the needs of the New Urban Agenda and the SDG 11. The Chairs would as well promote community partnerships and capacity-building, enabling multiple actors from urban communities to develop the skills to plan and realize their development objectives in line with the Agenda 2030 (SDG 11) and the NUA. These individuals would also be responsible for disseminating their research, education activities, products, publications, and other materials through the UNI portal. Additionally, they would organize international expert group meetings, seminars, symposia, and public lectures jointly with UN-Habitat. The Chairs would also participate in the biennial competition for the UN-Habitat University Award and flag possible fund-raising opportunities.

Whilst certainly quite new in the context of UN-Habitat operations, this approach is no novelty. In fact, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) had already had a long run for a similar if not identical program, now (as of 2022) in its thirtieth anniversary. Launched in 1992, the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme, which currently involves over 850 institutions in 119 countries, was devised by UNESCO to promote “international inter-university cooperation and networking to enhance institutional capacities through knowledge sharing and collaborative work”. The Programme supports the establishment of UNESCO Chairs, named by universities (sometimes in collaboration with other funders) to identify the collaboration with UNESCO, as well as ‘UNITWIN Networks’ of institutions collaborating on specific challenges in key priority areas related to UNESCO’s fields of competence (e.g., education, the natural and social sciences, culture and communication). A similar approach for UN-Habitat could have been an important step forward in the ways of institutionalizing partnerships with UNI member

universities and recognizing urban academics active within UNI.

Yet, the biennial competition did not eventually take place, and that the Chairs’ plan was never eventually actioned. This, at least in our discussions and interviews, was ascribed to the lack of resources to implement this model and limited interest by universities to ‘invest’ in the foundation of professorial chairs named after UN-Habitat. To obtain financing and generate a self-sustaining model, it was proposed to charge an admission fee to the member universities, but this plan was not carried out either after some initial scoping. Hence, whilst the UNESCO model followed here presented in principle an interesting possible step forward, it also clashed with several challenging academic realities and limitations of UNI. From our interviews and document review, it appears relatively clear that core obstacle to implement this approach laid both internally in universities, with limited understanding of the capacity to invest by academic institutions that are usually accustomed to external parties endowing funds for chairs rather than vice-versa, superimposed to growing financial limitations of many institutions (and enduring ones for Southern universities). More widely, this also highlighted the need to see the value proposition of UNI (and UN-Habitat more in general) in context of wider university orientations and expenditures. As with the UNESCO case, funding for a similar chair program would have come against not only limits to institutional investment, but also a whole wide suite of other similar initiatives outside of urban research and practice driving the establishment of similar chair-based appointments in universities. It also perhaps underscored that whilst in many cases certain individuals, or sub-institutional units like centres and departments, had been actively supportive of UNI, when it comes to a greater institutional buy in (typically by the whole institution in the appointment of chairs, or in some cases at constituent unit such as Faculty levels with central sign off by university executive) the potential return of investment by higher education institutions had not been articulated effectively or the buy in secured effectively – stressing again some individual/institutional divides at play in the development of UNI.

4. THE PRESENT? 2016-2021, HABITAT UNI AFTER HABITAT III

A recent evolution: Habitat UNI at and after Habitat III

The NUA was seen as the central UN-Habitat guide to building sustainable cities that can serve as engines of prosperity and centres of cultural and social well-being while protecting the environment. At this stage the NUA is also geared towards achieving the SDGs and addressing climate change in cities, linking explicitly into these two larger UN agendas (Paris Agreement and Agenda 2030). Since the introduction of the NUA, Habitat UNI has been seen as needing to contribute directly to achieving the goals established by the Agenda, encouraging its partners to guarantee its success.

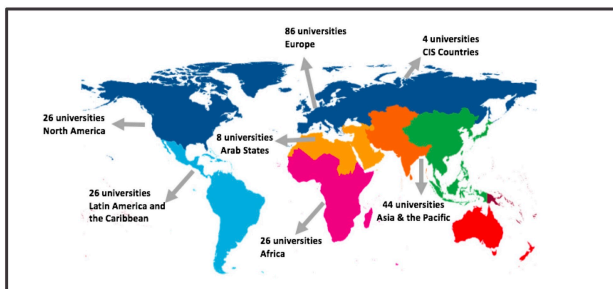


Figure 10: latest UNI membership (2021) © UN-Habitat

In 2016, UNI's work was further restructured, and the thematic hubs were reduced to six priorities to facilitate the implementation of projects and partnerships with universities moving forward. Once again, the Steering Committee defined that each hub would be led by a different member university, promoting education, policy advice, and professional development in its specific area.

The 2016 thematic axes and their corresponding leading universities are shown below:

- Informal Urbanism: Hosted by the University of Hannover, Germany
- Urban Governance: Hosted by London Metropolitan University, UK
- Climate Change: Hosted by Makerere University, Uganda
- Food Security: Hosted by Newcastle University, UK
- Urban Futures: Hosted by University of South Florida, US
- Gender Hub: Hosted by National University of Cordoba, Argentina

Once again, it should be noted that the results of each hub were heterogeneous, with the coordinating universities that had more significant resources in terms of time, human resources, and financing capable of obtaining better results. Two hubs, in particular, began to gain visibility, Informal Urbanism and Gender, mainly due to the efforts and strategic work of their respective Hub Coordinators. In 2017, the Global Urban Lecture Series had reached 91,000 views, with 35 lectures, becoming the primary tool for knowledge dissemination of the Initiative.

One of UNI's well-established modes of work throughout its decade of experience has been its ability to influence its institutional partners through the development of learning knowledge products. Among the various success stories, there is the design and inclusion of postgraduate, undergraduate, and specialization programs to contribute to the NUA and SDG implementation. Some examples are the Urban Management Masters and Ph.D. in Sustainable Territory Management offered by the Universidad Piloto in Colombia, the MSc in Climate Change and Sustainability offered by the Makerere University in Uganda, the Diploma in Physical Planning offered by the University of Papua New Guinea, and the Master of Planning offered by the Arvindbhai Patel Institute of Environmental Design in India.

Furthermore, through the years, several universities have shown their commitment to the initiative by hosting or organizing convening knowledge products. For instance, the University of 17 Agustus 1945 of Surabaya in Indonesia hosted the United Cities and Local Governments Congress in 2018. This Congress is a biennial event that brings together key urban development actors across Asian Pacific countries. Another success story is the Urban Thinkers Campus, organized by the Escuela Universitaria de Diseño, Innovación y Tecnología in Spain. The event aimed to create a space for critical exchange between urban researchers, practitioners, and decision-makers who believe that urbanization is an opportunity and can lead to positive urban transformations. To this end, James Cook University in Australia also hosted an Urban Thinkers Campus in 2018, concerned with applying the NUA locally in Cairns and Townsville to improve public health through good planning and design. Similar to these examples, there are several more instances in which institutional partners have organized events to show their commitment to the goals of the NUA and SDG 11.

In 2018, in an effort to catalogue the variety of university experiences engaged in UNI, the Initiative published the Big Blue Book led by the University of Deusto, as a 'tool' (or perhaps more correctly a compendium) that provided the wider public an opportunity to get acquainted with 70

university partners of Habitat UNI. The Book showcased the universities' achievements in research and education and depicted the urban studies undertaken. The mapping of the academic and research activities in the field of cities and urban studies provided a unique look into the knowledge that Universities and Research Centres were generating in a more holistic and integrated manner. Moreover, the Book showed that urban issues and challenges require collective efforts.



Figure 11: the 2018 *Big Blue Book* © UN-Habitat

Additionally, in 2018, UN-Habitat launched the Global Municipal Database, with the support of New York University and the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy, both Habitat UNI partners. The database contained municipal-level population data and municipal budget data for 94 cities worldwide and included the total municipal budget, self-sourced income, capital expenditures, and debt repayment. At the end of 2019, UNI had 230 institutional partners and more than 1,800 individual members of university programs that focus on the urban context and the built environment. Activity across the UNI hubs remained mixed, and the UNI website a central repository largely dormant, critically making it difficult for new members to make their interest known to the UNI secretariat. At this stage initial calls to further reform emerged both in the initiative steering committee and in UN-Habitat whilst the agency underwent a period of internal reform. Centrally, as part of broader changes of the agency's focus and commitments, internal funding supporting Habitat UNI (which was non-earmarked funding) was eventually removed, with the Capacity Development and Training Unit lacking direct funding to facilitate the coordination of UNI activities. This budgetary set back also came at a time of sizeable reform for UN-Habitat.

In 2020, UN-Habitat began implementing its Strategic Plan 2020-2023, and with this new plan, additional changes were incorporated into Habitat UNI. The Strategic Plan 2020-2023 lays out a recalibrated vision and mission reinforcing four integrated goals or domains of change:

1. Reducing spatial inequality and poverty in communities across the urban-rural continuum.
2. Enhancing shared prosperity of cities and regions.

3. Strengthening climate action and improving the urban environment.
4. Effectively preventing and responding to urban crises.

The domains also reflect the three transformative commitments of the NUA, which are: a) sustainable urban development for social inclusion and ending poverty, b) sustainable and inclusive urban prosperity and opportunities for all, and c) environmentally sustainable and resilient urban development. In addition, the Plan targeted the specific rights of women, children, youth, older people, and people with disabilities through each domain of change.

The current Strategic Plan of UN-Habitat also introduced the Communities of Practice (CoP) initiative, a forum where UN-Habitat staff can disseminate best practices, knowledge, and strategies to strengthen institutional progress. The CoPs intend to give visibility to the UN-Habitat experience, improving internal communication and increasing the Agency's learning consistency.

The CoPs have three fundamental purposes:

- 1) Support and develop solutions to emerging urban problems, increasing capacity-building by improving the use of the Agency's tools and methodologies.
- 2) Develop the normative capacity of UN-Habitat.
- 3) Integrate UN-Habitat staff, including Regional Offices, Multi-Country Offices, Country Offices, Liaison Offices, Field Offices, and Headquarters.

At the end of 2020, a more robust integration of Habitat UNI into the work of UN-Habitat was proposed by the CDTU in response to the Capacity Building Strategy approved by the Member States in October 2020 and the new work model developed in the *2020- 2023 Plan*. This integration fostered the realignment of thematic hubs with the work areas of UN-Habitat and an inventory of current and active partnerships with universities, throughout the six CoPs. Currently, there are eight different thematic hubs with widely differing levels of engagement and activity.

The idea of reinforcing UN-Habitat's work with universities was emphasized in the World Cities report published in November 2020. The report showed the potential of collaboration with academic institutions to achieve sustainable urban development and stressed the role of universities in educating the next generation of leaders and developing innovative solutions to the most pressing urban issues. Key examples were highlighted where collaboration agreements with universities generated

successful, replicable, and scalable outcomes. For instance, the report showcased a collaboration between the University of Nairobi, Columbia University, MIT, and the small US design firm Groupshot, who teamed up to map out Nairobi's matatu (minibus) routes and stops using GPS enabled mobile phones. The team used this data to create a schematic map that is also being used to measure access to health facilities and green spaces and measure the proportion of the population with access to frequent public transport, which is the indicator for SDG 11. Another successful initiative mentioned in the Report is *Town+Gown*, a program in New York. This approach uses experiential learning and faculty-directed research to facilitate partnerships between academics and practitioners on applied built environment research projects through the collaborative inquiry model of systemic action research.

Similar to these two initiatives, the report highlights a variety of critical collaborations with academic institutions to foster research and development opportunities for innovation and inclusive prosperity, which should guide Habitat UNI in building future partnerships. The challenges that the UNI Initiative has faced since its launch lie largely in the lack of human resources and funding devoted to the operation of UNI. However, the potential of the Initiative is enormous. By restructuring UNI's thematic axes, UN-Habitat aims to generate more beneficial alliances with UNI member universities, 250 and counting as of February 2022.

5. HABITAT UNI'S CHALLENGES

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Common challenges and UNI

The key challenges detailed in overall report *Linking UN-Habitat and Universities* have sound bearing on the way UNI operates and could evolve. Starting from the first of these, when it comes to the issue of reconciling individuals and institutions as partners, UNI is a particularly topical example affected by a very wide individual membership counting in the thousands. This can be a sizeable resource when engaged in information sharing, calls for expertise and convening of major forums, but it requires bespoke facilitation resources and can hardly function 'by itself' or in self-driven topical groupings (e.g. through Hubs). This has stressed to us the twin necessity of buy in by UN-Habitat in providing basic 'secretariat' support, as well as by institutions in the effective running of Hubs otherwise representing voluntary collections of individuals. Likewise, it has underlined a critical question of service and platform: a program like UNI could offer a well-recognised hub for raising and matching opportunities for both individuals and institutions, not just for listing members and their capacities. In turn, a greater emphasis on institutional commitment could encourage a shift from many individual consultants or even volunteering demands toward partnership modes that have **deeper and more flexible engagement with key centres of expertise**. Certainly, this appears to us and to many experts engaged as not "an either or" issue but one requiring clear fine tuning.

Relatedly, this also requires placing UNI more strategically and purposefully in broader knowledge systems. It is blatant that UNI coexists with a cast variety of other UN-Habitat programs involving academic institutions in often very similar formats of engagement, whilst those very institutions and individuals are pulled toward a whole variety of other networks and commitments, some of which better resourced than UNI. Notably, several (if not to some degree most) key urban research and training 'influencers' staff and academics identified for us are not represented in UNI. To this extent, UNI needs a **better enrolment strategy and value proposition**, wary of size of the network offer out there, and perhaps not fooled by the adage "build it and they will come" which is according to many unlikely to work here. As noted throughout the report some of this value proposition could be centred on not only a recognition but a proactive program of support for the 'next' generation of urban scholars and multilateral staff.

This is also true internally to the knowledge system of UN-Habitat. Although the number of results related to collaborations with academic institutions is vast, it is still challenging to identify which ones are either a direct result, or at least have been facilitated by the role of UNI. Therefore, to increase the initiative's visibility and better understand its actual impact, it is necessary to better determine which effective collaborations have benefited from UNI specifically and better communicate them internally and externally, but perhaps even more importantly leverage more explicitly UNI as a platform for new and applied partnerships between UN-Habitat and academia, documenting and advertising these clearly. Hence, according to many, some minimal 'secretariat' staffing for UNI would facilitate the network to more proactively offering to universities and university networks a more appealing space for engagement and in turn likely one much better aligned to networked funding opportunities

This, in turn, takes us to the ongoing matter of tackling the resources challenge. It is important to note once again that our study and consultations surfaced a wide variety of split opinions on the question of resourcing. For instance, one recommendation aimed at increasing impact-oriented outputs is to reduce the scope of UNI and work only with key anchor institutions that focus on the most relevant urban research topics, whilst still aiming to balancing North-South collaborations. In this way, priority would be given to institutions that work or seek to work in critical areas of the UN-Habitat pipeline, subordinating their membership in relation to the impact of their initiatives or projects.

Similarly, there have been calls (and to some degree attempts in the history of HPUI/UNI) to raise funds through membership and admission fees, which some see as necessary to provide return of investment for any UN-Habitat funds spent in convening UNI. However, this strategy has also been criticised repeatedly for its limiting factor on the participation of low-income universities, widening the gap between those who already have considerable exposure to UN-Habitat and those who rarely collaborate. It is also questioned repeatedly in light of the dual individual-institutional nature of UNI, with **individuals often participating of their own will with no backing or investment by their universities**.

Similarly, confusion is afoot in the naming of partnerships, with UN-Habitat staff (and many partner individuals/institutions too) often **referring to a partnership with a university when the partner is in fact an individual**, even without any formal partnership arrangement. This often leads to apparent wide university partnership networks that are in fact in some instances mainly composed of a mix of individuals, institutions,

departments and universities. The issue is far from easily resolvable and requires plenty of nuance: in many cases an individual or department are in fact sanctioned to *represent* their university in a UN-Habitat engagement, but in others that is simply not the case or informally the case. In some cases too universities are represented and engaged by a multiplicity of individuals and departments all working with UN-Habitat at the same time. The result, in most cases, is perhaps **the appearance of a presumed wide coalition “of universities”** when in fact **the networks underpinning UNI might be a very complex mixture of ‘anchor’ partners** – to use our main report’s language.

Overall, much of the input we gathered in the study points at the need to guarantee the UNI’s sustainability and increase the participation of a greater diversity of academic institutions. This is almost always stressed as **requiring an annual budget and some basic human resources** allocated solely to act as secretariat of UNI are in our view a required investment by UN-Habitat. A range of other alternative scenarios have been raised by some of our study participants, which in turn we have considered but are not detailed in depth for the purpose of focusing the following recommendations as an actionable menu of initiatives. One said scenario raised by several of our consultations and document reviews is that of simply **‘outsourcing’ UNI** for better funded capacity to convene it. This could for instance take the shape of transforming UNI in a program submitted and supported through one of the above-mentioned academic funding schemes like GCRF, or via a philanthropic fund – likely requiring UNI to be either run by a single (well resourced) university or by a coalition of ‘co-investigator’ institutions. The downside of this scenario is, in our and many of our participants’ views is its likely further departure from the core of UN-Habitat and even greater distancing from the ‘action’ of practical UN-Habitat programs, branches and convenings. Another downside could be the need to turn UNI into a single (or limited set of) purpose program to satisfy funding agendas, as by making it network centred on a sustainability-focused program, or ‘healthy cities’-oriented network, or other similar bespoke funding call/philanthropic priority theme. Hence, we decided to take the stance here that funding for core convening and central buy-in into UNI by UN-Habitat might after all be crucial at this stage, even in a short term (2-3 year) pilot phase, to build toward practical actions and reforms detailed below as possible next steps.

However, addressing at least temporarily the resource issue might not have to be a comparatively large investment: whilst large city networks like C40 Cities and UCLG operate with large teams, there is a well-established variety of networking programs that now operate successfully on smaller resources. In fact, even successful

new international programs like for instance the Mayors Migration Council, or the Cities CHANGE program **operate with relatively lean staff** (6 and 3 respectively). The same can be said of several large international academic programs, as for instance with the UK Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) ‘PEAK’ and ‘KNOW’ programs, both spanning large coalitions of universities and countries with Global South partners, and again both with lean secretariats (2 and 3 administrative staff respectively).

6. ENHANCING HABITAT UNI: A SUITE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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Our study of UN-Habitat-university partnerships has unveiled a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities. This is clearly characterized by a wide variety of modes of collaboration and of knowledge products emerging from these connections. In the previous section we have summarised some of the findings of this study into general themes of relevance in setting the direction of partnerships in the agency. So, what can be done now to tackle these challenges beyond aspirational advice often provided in these discussions?

Here, we move more specifically to a normative section aimed at strengthening one such avenue of partnership: Habitat UNI. The role of Habitat UNI as the purportedly main mechanism for promoting collaborations with academic institutions within UN-Habitat could in our view be strengthened and better leveraged by the agency. Building on this focus we outline a series of practical recommendations for UNI's operation in the years ahead with a focus on the short (1-2 years) and medium (3-5 years) terms of action.

Whilst characteristically these types of reports would also provide a speculative long-term detail, we would argue for immediate reforms, to ensure UNI's continuity (if not survival). These are designed as practical steps toward a better integration of UNI with UN-Habitat's core normative mission. In place of long-term speculation, we would instead propose, that CDTU should engage colleagues across UN-Habitat in a **more extended and more collective foresight and visioning exercise** that builds on better resourced initiatives and that, crucially, involves more overtly key voices in urban research not yet actively present in UNI, internal UN-Habitat staff and early career scholars and academics.

It is important to also stress how our recommendations are also all dependent on the capacity by UN-Habitat and UNI to strengthening visibility. We recognise CDTU is already working toward providing a **visible and resource-heavy online platform** for UNI, so we consider that action beyond the need for recommendation, but indeed a critical one that reflects well a set of the suggestions flagged below.

Our recommendations to UNI respond to the five themes in chapter 8 along **three core axes of reform**:

- A. focus the purpose of UNI explicitly as **the official university partnership program of UN-Habitat**,
- B. with its main activities aimed to **connect directly UN-Habitat programming and services** to university expertise and education, and vice-versa
- C. and its governance designed to be a **shared commitment by UN-Habitat staff and scholars** with a clear eye at institutional and 'next generation' engagement

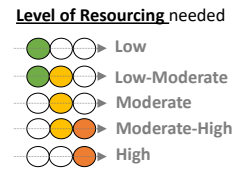
In [Annex 1](#) we also detail more **specific advice as to how the Terms of Reference for UNI could be adapted** according to some of our recommendations.

These in turn would support shifting the aim of UNI from more generic academic exchange loosely in relation to UN-Habitat to a tight presence in the agency's core business. It would also project a clear identity and offer a simplified mission to those keen to engage, whilst sharpening what the 'ask' for support is by UNI and what the possibilities for fundraising might be. This would also, in our view, drive attention and engagement with UNI beyond CDTU and currently active members, whilst presenting a more tangible value proposition for less active or absent centres of urban scholarship that should be engaged in UNI.

Different degrees of resource investment have been given to each of our recommendations. This is shown below as low, moderate, and high resource commitments. We understand resources not only to mean finances (critical to these activities) but also dedicated staff time and capacity to leverage key UN-Habitat venues/programs. We present these recommendations as a menu of options currently available to UNI management and leadership, and UN-Habitat more broadly, to choose and combine. These are ordered in terms of urgency and detailed also in their interconnections. We also highlight (*starred) what we would argue, based on our review, to be critical points of action. Recommendations staggering and inter-linkages are summarised in figure 21 below.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

In the short term, we believe that advice and evidence from our study points at urgent positioning and core operations support needs. With minimal adjustments, these steps could already strengthen Habitat UNI's operate within a short timeframe, starting with mid-2022 actions and bearing tangible fruits within 12-24 months. These include:



1. *Pump-prime internally a UNI secretariat.



A key feature of successful international programs and networks is their capacity to leverage a well organised core management hub. This could be pilot funded by UN-Habitat and co-supported by a core group of Northern and Southern universities, ideally drawn from the key 'influencers' identified in this report. The secretariat would be establishing a **more effectively resourced core coordination function** whose costs could eventually be partly offset to external funding programs. Yet these remain in our view a necessary investment by UN-Habitat unless outsourcing scenarios are considered where UNI is effectively spun off UN-Habitat (see annex 1).

- Resource need: **MODERATE**
In the short term this should be funded directly by UN-Habitat with a dedicated network convenor role and some base communications support and could also involve a small grant to a cohort of Early Career Scholars from the group of institutions to refresh and implement some of the recommendations of this review through 'new generation' leadership.
- Practical actions: appointment of a network coordinator and of support group of UN internship holders; appointment of a coordinating group of early career scholars from across a representative mix of UNI member institutions already engaged in UN-Habitat programs and projects; provision of a moderate operating budget to support core annual event, website maintenance (especially an 'opportunity board' for UN-habitat engagement and a resource sharing function), and possibly a student competition program to link UN-Habitat programs to university education (capstones/studios/thesis work).
- Linked actions: closely connected to action 2 and 3

2. *Move from network to program.



UN-Habitat should consider shifting the focus of UNI from an academic 'network' to that of **the flagship university partnership program of UN-Habitat**. This shifts the focus from maintaining a wide membership and convening activities to delivering on UN-Habitat-university partnerships with purpose and linking to other UN-Habitat programs. This would in turn require less focus on resourcing and supporting a networked exchange toward UNI's place in strategic facilitation capacity. This could entail re-designing ownership of UNI to be shared by two UN-Habitat Divisions. It would require revising UNI's ToR, building on secretariat resourcing (action 1) and working with a core group of partner institutions to generate suitable medium-long term external program funding principally through actions 2, 8 and 10.

- Resource need: **LOW** to **MODERATE**
Co-investment in secretariat convening by two UN-Habitat divisions; co-investment (possibly through bespoke funding proposals through actions 6 and 11) by academic institutional partners (e.g. via international networking funding programs and philanthropic donors).
- Practical actions: shift of UNI program ownership across Global Solutions Divisions and External Relations, Strategy and Knowledge and Innovation Division; revised Steering Committee membership (to represent both universities and UN-Habitat staff involving key UN-Habitat branch/program leads and CoP representatives); revised UNI ToR to focus more sharply purpose and membership process
- Linked actions: closely connected to action 5 but also 8 to 11

3. *Focus on the 'next' generation of urbanists.



UNI needs to **better engage with the 'next' generations of urban voices**. This should facilitate access to the UN system and cutting-edge urban programs of UN-Habitat for emerging scholars, students and early career practitioners undertaking higher education. It can be delivered by identifying training opportunities UN-Habitat can facilitate collaboratively during their academic journeys. These opportunities need to be promoted and communicated to the network, ensuring that students, and early career researchers from universities with limited resources can also access them; this could be a relatively radical shift of focus for the network.

- Resource need: **MODERATE to HIGH**
Engaging with early career academics and practitioners (including UN-Habitat staff) often drives less directly available resources than more senior 'names' in the field; whilst a general shift in this direction would only require a change in ToR and language used by UNI, at limited costs, this initiative could require more moderate to high resources to support early career researchers in engaging meaningfully in UNI leadership, events and exchanges, as through fellowship programs. Possible sources of this founding could be university alliances (e.g. IARU, U21) or national donors (e.g. DFAT for Asia-Pacific scholars) but would also potentially appeal to foundations and private sector if implemented topically via Hubs/CoPs.
- Practical actions: involve a group of early career researchers in UNI Steering Committee group; annual next generation urbanist summit, UN-Habitat Fellowship program of visiting/hosting for early career researchers at PhD/Postdoctoral stages.
- Linked actions: connected to reform of UNI leadership (action 7) and educational engagement (action 10)

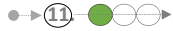
4. Rethink membership pathways.



UNI's positionality within the broader knowledge partnership set up of UN-Habitat is still somewhat unclear and could be strengthened with an even clearer identity. For instance, membership of UNI could be extended to other institutions and individuals formally (by contract or MoU) engaging with UN-Habitat, making it **the default university partnership platform** in a non-exclusive way with other UN-Habitat initiatives. This requires limited resources but also, as stressed above, a sound support toward web-based capacity for UNI. The need for an efficient and accessible online platform speaks clearly to the well-recognized challenge for Habitat UNI to strengthen communication channels both internally and externally, facilitating collaboration between network members and UN-Habitat staff.

- Resource need: **LOW**
Membership adjustments would only require more formalised buy in and strategic setting of UNI within the broader knowledge system of UN-Habitat
- Practical actions: increased institutional and individual membership of UNI; membership registration of non-active or missing 'influencers' and other key academic partners of UN-Habitat programs not represented in UNI; development of a repository of UN-Habitat university partners.
- Linked actions: clearly linked to the need to recognise university presence in flagship UN-Habitat initiatives (action 7)

5. Build better reciprocal understanding.



Better understanding of the specific challenges faced by universities on the one hand and by UN-Habitat on the other, not least the common ones (e.g., funding), is needed. In annex here we provide an initial element of this conversation in the form of a visual guide for UN-Habitat staff to common challenges and emerging opportunities from the academic sector, suggesting an exchange conversation or a **short academia 101 'masterclass'** on this might go a long way for staff to better strategize collaborations and tenders.

- Resource need: **LOW**
This could be cost-effectively provided by a group of UNI members and UN-Habitat academic partners in the style of the Global Urban Lectures, as a short self-paced set of a few learning sessions for UN staff – likely of appeal to agencies beyond UN-Habitat.
- Practical actions: free (urban) academia 101 'masterclass' course; regular sharing workshop to share UN and academic challenges and identify possible collaborative solutions.
- Linked actions: potentially well aligned to connect to other 'sister' multilateral program for this type of discussions (action 11)

6. Link key communities of interest.



This would entail a partial redesign where possible of the Hubs structure to facilitate greater integration with key areas of UN-Habitat work, with Hubs co-chaired by a CoP lead and a lead academic institution representative with strong profile in these areas of action (e.g. a lead from the Climate Change CoP teaming up with a recognizable urban climate action scholar), with a well-defined core group of partner institutions but also an open membership for individual experts with a focus on this area. This is a **mission-driven co-led Hub approach** that needs to be aligned to CoPs, possibly with a smaller set of themes but greater emphasis on exchange and resource pooling, which in turn can play a critical role in resourcing through topically-oriented funding proposals to academic funding bodies, philanthropies and national donors with bespoke interest in the theme of the Hub/CoP – notably, as per above, core UNI management funding cannot come from these topical areas

- Resource need **LOW** to **MODERATE**
As already demonstrated by UNI the convening of a Hub through networking and event activities requires relatively low resources, but its expansion to a program of research and intervention does necessitate sizeable grant money, from funders like national research councils or philanthropies focused on that specific theme.
- Practical actions: revised Hub structure and operations mirroring revised Steering Committee and requiring clear resource development and knowledge application plans by Hubs; targeted program of fundraising through bespoke proposals to national funders (e.g UKRI, NIH) and philanthropies with a focus on thematic programs in the Hub's area, supported jointly by UN-Habitat's Management Advisory and Compliance Services and university research development offices.
- Linked actions: this could be seen as a first short-term step toward action 7 and its linking UNI as *the* UN-Habitat university program

MEDIUM-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS:

In the medium term, within 3 to 5 years, a reform of UNI's program could effectively leverage stronger UN-Habitat-university collaborations, as well as the implementation of *some* of the short-term reforms above toward

7. ***Place UNI at the heart of the agency.**



A stronger internal UN-Habitat network of UNI champions across divisions and practices is needed. ASs we outline in annex 1, this needs to be reflected in a revised steering committee with greater UN-Habitat representation to ensure UNI **presence in flagship UN-Habitat knowledge products.**

- Resource need **LOW**
This would only require central UN-Habitat management and flagship program buy-in to make use of UNI as a valid platform for engagement with universities or indeed recognition of existing collaborations, encouraging formal membership and content sharing
- **Practical actions:** selecting partners in flagship projects through open calls for proposals/qualifications published on UNI site and otherwise disseminated to UNI membership and elsewhere UN-Habitat Branch directors and regional representatives aware and actively engaged in using new UNI platform
- **Linked actions:** closer central buy-in and recognition would go hand in hand with stronger coordination resourcing (action 1) shift of scope (action 2), CoP alignment (action 6) and focusing on the 'next' generation voices (action 3)

8. **Re-value the engagement with individuals.**



UNI needs a better **redefined 'individual' academic membership strategy** that still values single participants as experts in their own right beyond the institutions but ensures this participation does not jeopardise continuity or coherence of a tighter and more effective network. This could be achieved by testing channels of communication (e.g. via an accessible catalogue of university centres and individual experts), opportunity raising (e.g. via a job/consultancy opportunity board) and dissemination (e.g. via a live blog with expert insights linking to current urban research and to current UN-Habitat knowledge initiatives). This would present an enhanced system of opportunity-raising (CoPs and projects, exchange, and events, needs by UN-Habitat staff that can be supported by universities and vice-versa) and of resource sharing, that could go hand-in-hand with – also of use to institutional members

- Resource need **LOW**
This initiative mainly requires a shift in management focus and some bespoke individual membership facilitation. That could be either through some dedicated time of the secretariat or outsourced to a group of partner institutions; We would encourage resisting any tendency to charge membership fees.
- **Practical actions:** website platform content across three sections with a job/opportunity board, an expert insights blog, and a repository of expertise searchable database.
- **Linked actions:** This could go hand-in-hand with a clearer Hub structure re-aligned to CoPs (action 6) with individual members electing sub-membership of specific Hubs (akin to the same sub-structuring of academic and professional organisations)

9. Strengthen UNI's international voice.



Pending some degree of either internal investment in a 'secretariat'/program management team, or indeed outsourcing and resourcing by a group of core management universities, UNI should rethink its **presence on key platforms for urban discussions and thought leadership**. This could take the shape of sharing, mirroring and co-hosting at both UNI events and via the UNI website platform a running series of interventions by next generation scholars and well established leaders in the field, ensuring access to UNI is also based on live interventions in major debates, of instance recognising the success of engaging into live insight sharing platform (like CitiScope at the time of the Habitat III process and conference, Next City, Global Urbanist, or the long-standing visibility of the likes of Planetizen (Bloomberg) City Lab and more) and representation/promotion of UNI at major professional and academic conferences

- Resource need **MODERATE to HIGH**
This would require support from the External Engagement and communications teams of UN-Habitat to match interventions on core UN-Habitat programs with also key thought leaders in urban research; it would also require facilitation by an established UNI team (internal or external to UN-Habitat) to identify and facilitate interventions by early career researchers and navigate with CDTU agreements for open access sharing with one or more public debate platforms as per above.
- Practical actions: WUF forums involving emerging voices and greater WUF visibility (e.g. in main academic-led events or flagship events involving a 'UNI' academic/institutional partner); UNI presence at major academic association events and professional summits sponsoring/organising panels and side events.
- Linked actions: this is closely connected to next generation (action 3) and individual membership (action 8) strategies but also shift to greater presence in CoPs (action 6)

10. Engage with curriculum.



To step beyond networking academics into impact on university sector, UNI's strategy needs to engage more explicitly with universities as sites of normative UN-Habitat work, not just as partners. This would involve **facilitated ('accredited') training, recognizing training service by UN-Habitat staff to academia** and opening up a facilitation program, through the UNI secretariat, for academic programs (e.g. graduate courses, studios, PhD courses) to engage directly in UN-Habitat projects.

- Resource need **MODERATE to HIGH**
Whilst much of this engagement already happens to quite some degree in an ad hoc and generally not-funded manner, a distinctive and well managed program of this type would require a clear investment by an education oriented main national donor or a philanthropic institution with strong commitment to education; this might require partnership with another multilateral institution (UNESCO, HESI, UNU, UNITAR) but would enhance a clear educational function and bridging capacity in capacity building for UNI.
- Practical actions: recognition by staff supervisors and managers of value of normative work through educational programs in universities as guest lecturers, doctoral supervisors and examiners, curriculum development consultants etc.; expanding the scope of Global Urban Lectures by working with a select group/coalition of academic institutions to develop a series of creditable MOOCs, offering an interactive educational experience.
- Linked actions: partnering with sister programs (action 11) might be the most effective approach here

11. Partner with sister multilateral programs.



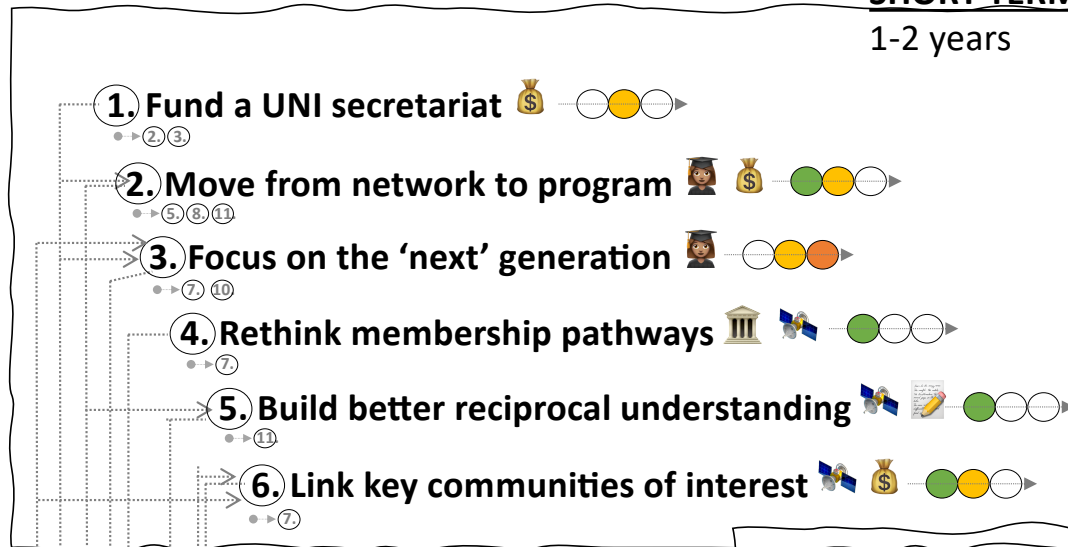
A more strategic engagement with other multilateral programs of relevance to UNI-involved universities is also recommended to enhance UNI's effectiveness and network reach. --- hand in hand with a more strategic institutional partnership strategy aimed at key 'anchor' institutions (with an eye at North-South balance) that are also more representative of current key voices in urban research/training

- Resource need **MODERATE** to **HIGH**
Whilst there might be low-moderate financial needs here, we would argue effective management of an inter-agency collaboration prompted by UNI to bridge into other major multilateral initiatives in this space might require accessing a medium-term establishment and development fund centred on educational activities

7. VISUAL SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT TERM

1-2 years



key REPORT THEMES

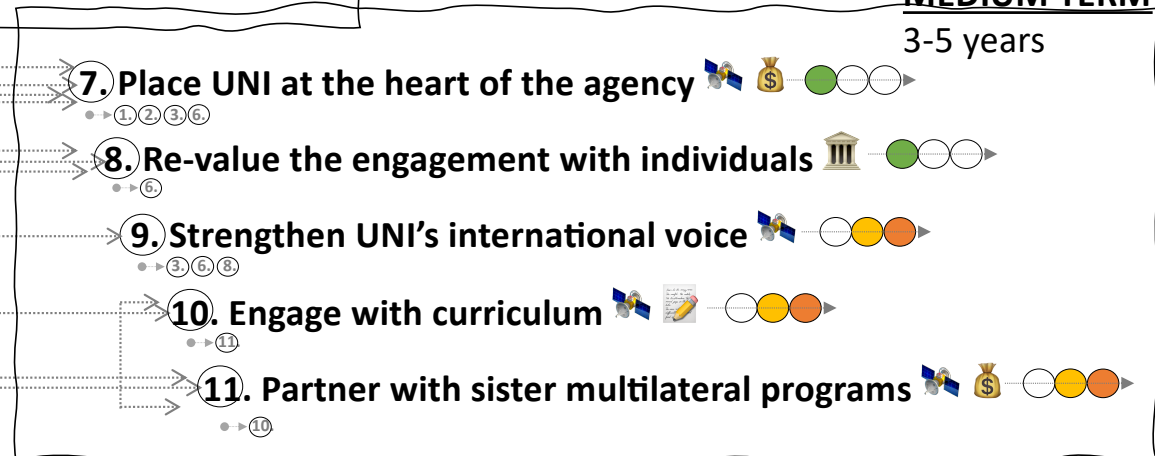
1. individual-institutional dynamic
2. next generation
3. broader circuits of knowledge
4. value of educational engagement
5. enduring resource challenges

Level of Resourcing needed

- Low
- Low-Moderate
- Moderate
- Moderate-High
- High

MEDIUM TERM

3-5 years



9. ELEMENTS OF A NEW ToR

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As outlined in the recommendations section of this annex and its main report, our review advises a **clear directional change** and **fundamental reform of UNI**.

We believe the development of complete Terms of Reference for an enhanced UNI as a university partnership program of UN-Habitat should be conducted in consultation with academic leadership, key university partners of UN-Habitat and an empowered group of early career staff and scholars representing the next generation of urban thinking. To that end we resist here presenting a fully detailed new ToR for UNI and rather offer a set of suggestions for preliminary changes to current materials that determine the direction of UNI as per its original 2013 ToR (as HPUI, also including the original 2011 charter) and its proposed revisions in 2016. We would encourage readers to consult those original documents for comparison and focus here on proposition rather than a lengthy summary of those texts.

In particular, below we highlight suggested changes in focus for UNI's aim and vision, objectives, principles, operationalisation and its core operating body of the UNI Steering Committee. Alongside this we also propose an added 'Senior Advisory Board' and a UNI Secretariat.

Suggested changes and edits to original wording by UN-Habitat, HPUI and Habitat UNI are provided here in **light blue** for ease of identification of our inputs across these various key elements of UNI's ToR. These are provided by offering here direct edits into text made available by CDTU colleagues in the lead up to this report.

UNI's Aim

The aim of the UNI is to harness the strengths of **university partnerships** and promote cooperation **between UN-Habitat and the academic sector** in the fields of education, research, **capacity building** and policy advice towards progressive collaborations on sustainable urban development.

UNI's Vision

Habitat UNI is UN-Habitat's **flagship program for university partnerships**. It presents a **recognition of the centrality of university partnerships to the delivery of UN-Habitat's centre of excellence mission and to the sustainable development of cities worldwide**. Its vision is to **foster the**

next generation of urban **thought** leaders, **be they policymakers and** managers, researchers, **community activist** or **private sector** practitioners, and promote a global exchange of knowledge between them **through effective university partnerships with UN-Habitat**. Habitat UNI will **advocate for recognition of the value of UN-Habitat-university partnerships, encourage two-way exchanges and networking across its breadth of capacities, and strive to link networking to practical actions in and with cities on the ground**.

UNI Strategic objectives

To achieve its aim and vision, UNI will:

- Provide a global platform to encourage dialogue and debate within the UNI community **formed by UN-Habitat staff and academics alike, as well as between this community and key stakeholders in sustainable urban development**
- **Advocate for inclusion, diversity, solidarity and respect across the UNI community**
- **Engage in practical applications of UN-Habitat-university partnerships that have direct bearing on the work of policy and decision makers, practitioners and the other key urban development stakeholders internationally.**
- Promote the **alignment and delivery** of world-class educational programmes **with UN-Habitat's mission** for the next generation of practitioners and leaders.
- **Facilitate the connection between UN-Habitat and universities with the aim to** undertake capacity building programmes to disseminate research results and best practices **that enhance the mission**.
- Support cutting-edge interdisciplinary research and thinking that spans the scope of urban issues. The research will be strategic in setting the global urban agenda and will be conducted with a wide range of international partners with capabilities in urban theory, implementation, regulation and policy development.
- Promote a demand-led approach to urban research, which would speed up the process of identification, development and uptake of solutions related to sustainable urban development.
- **Foster** dissemination mechanisms to maximize the uptake of its research, **educational collaborations** and policy advice so that **UN-Habitat-university partnerships** have a demonstrable, tangible impact.

- Develop a knowledge management portal that will support the transfer of innovation and knowledge. The portal will be one of the tools through which UNI and other networks can interact. It will serve as the first stop for reliable up-to-date information and knowledge on sustainable urban development.

UNI Principles

UNI promotes sustainable urban development as originally set out by its Steering Committee in the principles below

- Accessible and pro-poor land, infrastructure, services, mobility and housing
- Socially-inclusive, gender sensitive, healthy and safe development
- Environmentally sound and carbon efficient built environment, including the use of appropriate technologies
- Participatory planning and decision-making processes
- Vibrant, resilient and competitive local economies promoting decent work and livelihoods
- Conditions of non-discrimination and equitable rights to the city
- Governance structures that will empower cities and communities to plan for effective management of adversity and change
- Transparent and efficient local resource mobilization

Alongside these principles, and cognizant of the variety of themes ushered by newer global agendas like the SDGs, Paris Agreement and the New Urban Agenda, we would argue the development of UNI's new approach should consider including in its principles:

- A more explicit statement towards ambitious climate goals (e.g zero net or 1.5 targets)
- A more explicit statement toward an inclusive recovery from the impact of the pandemic
- A more explicit statement toward urban resilience and crisis preparedness for natural hazards and human made disasters

Operationalization of the UNI program

UNI will emphasize the [unique value of UN-Habitat-university partnerships in striving for sustainable development](#).

UNI will be driven [jointly by academic and UN-Habitat leadership, as a common effort toward the ambition inscribed in the New Urban Agenda and the SDGs](#).

[UNI will facilitate two tiers of membership: institutions and individuals](#).

University networks and University-led associations will be able to [link formally into UNI via bespoke MoUs \(Memoranda of Understanding\) that shall be explicitly targeted toward enhancing the circulation of innovative urban research and teaching approaches, and supporting the next generation of urbanists](#).

UNI's core management is centred around three key elements: a UNI Secretariat that manages UNI's operations; a UNI Steering Committee that provides [strategic direction](#); and a [Senior Advisory Board that provides strategic guidance and support to facilitate access to key sources of networking, funding and visibility](#).

UNI Membership

Members signing up to the principles of UNI agree to promote sustainable [and inclusive](#) urban development on local, national, regional and global levels

[UNI could include providing the [option of assigning default membership to all university partners at department scale and above \(university and university network\) that engage formally with UN-Habitat through contracts](#). This could also involve dissemination of individual membership information to individual academic who engage formally with UN-Habitat through contracts]

UNI promotes joint activities, projects, programmes and fundraising [between UNI members and UN-Habitat staff and programs](#). The above strategic objectives will be achieved through education, research, professional development, policy advice and knowledge [exchange](#).

Individual members

On an individual level membership is acquired through individual application via bespoke portal, thereby joining the Initiative's database and mailing list. This is done in a scholar's personal capacity and not in representation of a higher education institution, department or other university body.

To become an individual member, the scholar needs to have a proven commitment to the principles and a profile targeted towards Sustainable Urban Development. The individual needs to commit through not only adhering to the Initiative principles but also through [active participation in UNI exchanges, Hubs and activities](#).

Individual membership is granted for five years in the first instance, renewable.

Institutional members

Universities and other tertiary institutions are eligible for institutional membership. While it is the aim to have the highest level of the university engaged to facilitate multi-sectoral activities across departments and schools, the Initiative also invites institutional membership at sub-institutional level (for example, department, school or faculty), when not already covered by a higher-level institutional membership for the tertiary institution in question.

Universities signed up as members at a sub-institutional can choose to 'scale up' their commitment to UNI to a higher level institutional membership at any time.

To become an institutional member, the institution needs to have a proven commitment to the principles and a profile targeted towards Sustainable Urban Development. The institution needs to commit through not only adhering to the Initiative principles but also through formalizing this adherence through an Exchange of Letters or, under exceptional circumstances, a Memorandum of Understanding. Institutional members are subject to a review process and may distinguish themselves through their work and commitment towards the goals of the Initiative. Institutional membership is granted for five years in the first instance, renewable.

UNI Secretariat

UNI is managed in its daily operations and in the organisation of key activities and events by a lean and collaborative Secretariat. The Secretariat is co-hosted by two UN-Habitat divisions alongside a core coalition¹⁸ of UNI member institutions (balanced to represent Global North and South). It is managed by a dedicated program coordinator, as well as the UNI co-chairs, with support from UN-Habitat communications and a core group of representatives of UNI institutional member universities gathered in UNI's steering committee. The core group of UNI support institutions has to be representative of Global North and South and present a clear commitment to UNI and UN-Habitat, as well as ideally pre-existent networked relations between themselves.

Steering committee

¹⁸ Here we explicitly avoid naming what the number of institutions should be in the core: we believe this should be determined in a proper planning and governance process and potentially be the result of an

UNI is steered by its partners within UN-Habitat and in the academic sector, as represented by UNI's Steering Committee. The Steering Committee is co-chaired by UN-Habitat and academic leadership, including members that represent UN-Habitat's knowledge and capacity building work and UN-Habitat's normative mission, alongside members that represent the diversity of academic institutions

The Steering Committee is explicitly representative of early career scholars in academia and staff members at UN-Habitat, balanced two-thirds to one-third, with clear representation from both Global North and South. Steering Committee members are appointed by application to the UNI Secretariat when a Committee vacancy is available, and after applications are reviewed by UNI's Senior Advisory Board. Steering Committee members stand for two years, for a maximum of two terms. Prospective Steering Committee members are encouraged to apply for membership in groups linking diverse institutions.

The Steering Committee has the main purpose of:

1. Supporting UN-Habitat in the set up and staffing of the UNI Secretariat
2. Providing strategic direction for UNI
3. Overseeing the UNI secretariat operations
4. Developing and maintaining a strategic plan
5. Steering UNI's engagement in core UN-Habitat programming and flagship activities
6. Steering UNI's engagement in major academic networks and university sector fora
7. Facilitating UNI's presence in major relevant UN fora (e.g. WUF)
8. Updating priorities, membership management and criteria

Senior Advisory Board

UNI is guided by advice provided by a joint group of key leaders in UN-Habitat and higher education, representing deep expertise in applied urban research and education. Senior Advisory Board members stand for three years, for a maximum of two terms. Members are appointed by a public call open to academics and practitioners working on urban development, with leadership of UN-Habitat (e.g. Global Solutions Division) participating ex officio.

The Senior Advisory Board has the main purpose of:

open and fair call for core partners. Ideally this would be a small but tightly knit number of universities that is well balanced between Global North and South, and appointed on a well devised plan of action.

1. Supporting UN-Habitat in the set up and staffing of UNI's Steering Committee
2. Providing mentorship and advice to the Steering Committee in setting the strategic direction for UNI
3. Reviewing, giving input and endorsing UNI's strategic plan
4. Supporting and facilitating recognition of UNI in flagship UN-Habitat activities
5. Supporting and facilitating recognition of UNI in major academic networks and university sector fora
6. Providing expert insight and leadership at critical junctures of the UNI program

UNI Hubs¹⁹

Habitat UNI Universities thematic Hub are formal areas of specialism within UNI that convene bespoke activity around pressing areas for Sustainable Urban Development. UNI Hubs are explicitly aligned to a UN-Habitat Community of Practice (CoP) and co-chaired by a UN-Habitat staff member from that CoP and an academic with expertise and track record in the same area. They act as smaller consortia of universities within the broader mission of UNI. Their members agree to work on the same thematic priority under the principles of mutual collaboration, exchange and learning, producing outputs which strengthen the role of universities in forwarding sustainable urban development and UN-Habitat's activity in these thematic areas. UNI Hubs are established for up to five years in the first instance, renewable, upon agreement of a working plan between UNI Hub consortium universities, CoP staff and UNI Secretariat staff.

Formal Hubs themes are developed in consultation between UN-Habitat's Communities of Practice leads, Steering Committee, Advisory Committee and managed by the UNI Secretariat. They are directly aligned to UN-Habitat's mission and vision, and developed explicitly as collaborative efforts between UN-Habitat staff and UNI academics.

Hubs operate and governance is overseen by UNI's Steering Committee and Secretariat, and allows for variation as per needed by different topical areas, but needs to include: 1) joint UN-Habitat-university

leadership, 2) an ongoing program of exchange between academics and UN-Habitat staff, 3) clear strategic alignment to major UN-Habitat initiatives and themes.

UNI Hubs can be supported by a mixture of internal UN-Habitat, internal academic and external funds and can include a major external partner (e.g. private sector, national government research council or development ministry, or another multilateral institution).

UNI Hubs are reviewed every 3 years by Steering Committee and Advisory Board.

[This would require an initial strategy settings session of consultative and evidence-based nature, designed to ensure transition and alignment of current UNI Hub initiatives into this new format, as well as ongoing (possibly yearly) UNI strategy sessions to review the Hubs approach, led by Steering Committee and Secretariat with Advisory Board guidance.]

¹⁹ We are conscious of both the need for this process to be consultative and more strategic than a review like this one, as well as the existence of some variously active Hubs within the present form of UNI. To that end we avoided providing any more specificity as to this Hubs set up

and instead point at the need for the Steering Committee and Secretariat to develop that in a properly fleshed out strategy session once the new set up of UNI is outlined.

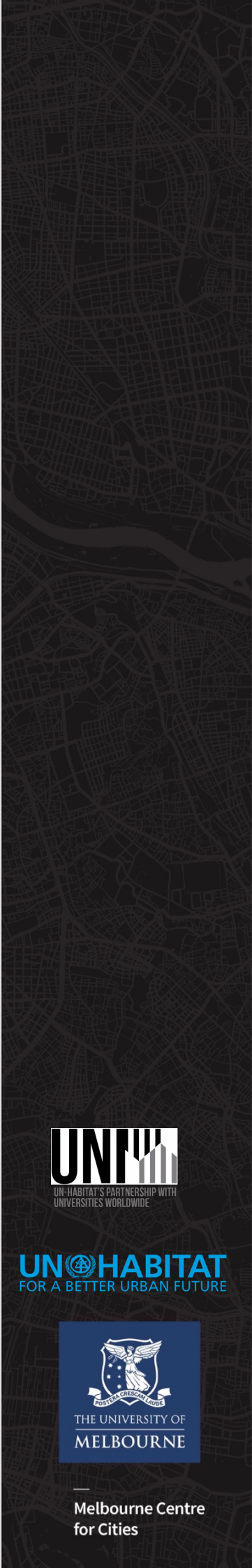


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