General Assembly

Seventy-fifth session
Agenda item 147
Joint Inspection Unit

Policies and platforms in support of learning: towards more coherence, coordination and convergence

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Policies and platforms in support of learning: towards more coherence, coordination and convergence" (see A/75/713).

I. Introduction

1.   In its report entitled "Policies and platforms in support of learning: towards more coherence, coordination and convergence" (see A/75/713), the Joint Inspection Unit aims to identify and recommend ways to optimize the intellectual capital represented by the staff of the United Nations, by means of learning.

II. General comments

2.   Organizations of the United Nations system welcome the report and its findings, noting it provides valuable insights to support learning and development in the years to come. Organizations express their appreciation to the Inspector and his team for their active listening, constructive observations and their advice regarding which factors matter in strengthening a learning culture within the United Nations as well as within each organization in the United Nations system.

3.   Organizations recognize that the learning landscape is changing very rapidly owing to fast-evolving delivery technology, which is exponentially increasing both supply and demand and the democratization of access and has increased the leveraging of learning to make United Nations projects and programmes more impactful as well as sustainable. These factors may have an impact on some of the more detailed findings and recommendations, making them prematurely outdated. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic makes the report even more timely and relevant, as innovation in learning with new technologies is needed now more than ever.

4.   Going forward, organizations advocate a continuous and inclusive process of collaboration between learning experts, including managers, for mutual inspiration and organized collaboration on common projects, with the objective of making learning increasingly impactful and sustainable across the United Nations system.

5.   Organizations recognize that the review is heavily focused on formal learning programmes and does not fully capture the dynamic and informal aspects of the future of learning. They further note that the report would have benefited from a greater recognition of the role of multilingualism in achieving a harmonious workplace and an agile workforce fit for the future of the United Nations, by leveraging languages, both as learning subjects in their own right and as mediums of instruction for substantive learning programmes. Organizations also note that the report may have provided greater emphasis on the types of accompanying policies to address the need for upskilling of learning staff.

6.   Several organizations underscore the importance of strategically defining the meaning and scope of some of the actions proposed, including through a clearly identified lead coordination mechanism for those initiatives that require coordinated action across the United Nations system.

7.   Organizations partially support the recommendations.

III. Comments on specific recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should establish a minimum set of key performance indicators and associated targets for the efficiency of learning programmes and their effectiveness in support of business outcomes, which the organizations should monitor and report on to the governing bodies.

8.   Organizations partially support this recommendation. While entities recognize the links between investment in learning and business outcomes, they note it is rather

difficult to systematically measure the impact of learning on business outcomes globally since there are many contributing factors to organizational performance and learning is only one of the contributing factors for improved business performance.

9.   While supporting the principle of learning evaluation, organizations note the impracticality of evaluating the impact of every learning intervention and underscore a correlation between the depth of the evaluation to the size of the investment. Consideration also needs to be given to the availability of reliable data, evaluation methods and other metrics to capture learning results along with required resources to manage and maintain the systems and processes.

10.   Entities concur that the key performance indicators and related targets should be about impact and effectiveness instead of efficiency. They note that the scope of the proposed recommendation would exclude language learning programmes and microlearning and only evaluate macrolearning and they suggest measuring learning programmes by focusing on identifying how learning supports business outcomes and which outcomes it supports. They also suggest measuring how the languages of instruction affect such outcomes.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should integrate the evaluation findings on learning into the learning management systems and use them effectively to inform decision-making processes on future learning activities.

11.   Organizations partially support this recommendation and while they recognize the need for organizational learning cycles that enable continuous evaluation and inform decision-making processes on learning, they also note that the changing environment, emerging priorities and opportunities and needs play an important role in driving decision-making processes on future learning activities.

12.   The shift of the United Nations system towards adaptive management lets learning management systems be only one element of a United Nations organization's learning infrastructure. Other programming support systems will also need to integrate the findings, as learning will increasingly merge with programming work in general.

13.   Several entities report ongoing implementation of the above recommendation and their commitment to collaborating and increasing the interoperability of the respective learning management systems and to leveraging synergies.

14.   Organizations further note that the evaluation findings can be integrated into systems other than learning management systems, such as experiential learning platforms or other reporting tools that enable decision-making. To this end, the proposed recommendation would benefit from taking into account the continuous learning trends affecting the industry.

15.   Finally, for those organizations with a learning landscape restricted by annual training budgets, the prioritization of training efforts is often based on emerging operational requirements rather than on evaluation findings, with the result that training needs far exceed the resources provided by Member States to meet those needs.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, in consultation with the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, examine the existing options for a comprehensive joint curriculum or at least system-wide quality assurance of courses related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, by the end of 2021.

16.   Organizations support this recommendation, although they need to explore the feasibility of delivering on it by the end of 2021.

17.   Organizations further recognize that there have been several initiatives in this direction, including the development of the United Nations Leadership Framework (United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, High-level Committee on Management) and the leadership culture assessment (by the United Nations System Staff College and McKinsey and Company). Any future joint curricula would aim at avoiding overlapping with existing courses and would lead to specific efficiencies, bearing in mind the target audiences' language diversity. Time and resources will be of the essence.

18.   Several entities welcome a leadership and/or coordinating role of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research and the United Nations System Staff College, and support the mobilization of the common system learning network (of learning managers) for the development of this common objective.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of United Nations organizations should take the actions they deem appropriate to better integrate staff learning plans into their respective performance assessments and to ensure that managers are also held accountable for implementation.

19.   Organizations partially support this recommendation and note that it will be beneficial to expand its scope to include language learning, as language skills directly contribute to performance.

20.   Entities that measure performance at the field office level note that learning should be continuous, collaborative and directly integrated with the results-based management system. Compliance with training requirements and better integration of training (plans) into individual performance assessments are important. Managers could be held accountable for discussing and ensuring the implementation of these plans with their respective staff members. At the same time, it is recognized that the managers can only be held accountable for implementing training to the extent that well-developed training programmes and resources for training are made available.

Recommendation 5

The Director General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization should, in coordination with the executive heads of all interested organizations in the United Nations system, in particular the United Nations System Staff College, establish and maintain a comprehensive catalogue of open learning resources that are relevant for individual organizations and for cross-cutting learning needs, in particular those related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

21.   While this recommendation is addressed to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), organizations welcome a comprehensive catalogue of open learning resources.

22.   UNESCO recognizes the value of a comprehensive catalogue of open learning resources within the United Nations system and will be willing to contribute to its creation.

23.   Entities note that the creation of such an open-source repository should build on the Sustainable Development Goals learning initiative, "UN SDG: Learn", and avoid duplications, while benefiting from the support of the network of legal advisers of United Nations system organizations around licensing and permissions for the sharing and reuse of content produced by the entities. Organizations also encourage the inclusion in this catalogue of resources in various languages.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should establish criteria for the more systematic use of external platforms, based on judicious curating of their courses and realistic learning objectives.

24. Organizations partially support this recommendation.

25. The majority note that they are at different stages of sourcing learning opportunities from external platforms, both within the United Nations system and outside, including through the development of criteria on how to engage with external providers.

26. Organizations welcome the opportunity to collaborate in the research on future learning platforms beyond learning management systems, such as experiential learning platforms.

27. While organizations recognize that external learning platforms bring the benefit of ensuring that training opportunities are available in all regions of the world, meet the needs of the learner more holistically and allow for the preferred language of learning, thereby strengthening multilingualism within the United Nations system, they also underscore their limitations in terms of diversity and delivery of content. Increasingly though, platforms are revisiting their approaches, adding diversity to their trainers and incorporating content from international organizations.

28. However, some note that the widespread use of these platforms would need to be assessed, based on the needs of business owners, cost-effectiveness, relevance to the capacity development needs of staff, as well as the diversity of curricula offered by external platforms.

29. In addition, security provisions are required in order to prevent malware being inserted into United Nations platforms. In addition, participating staff would need to be advised on security "do's and don'ts" when discussing United Nations activities.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, through inter-agency agreements, recognize relevant learning programmes followed on external platforms, for which appropriate credentials are presented, and reflect that recognition in the learning management systems.

30. Organizations support this recommendation, with the following caveats: many organizations recognize the benefits that the mutual recognition of learning activities among United Nations organizations and other relevant entities would bring in terms of coordination, the effective use of resources and positive employee experience, as well as the approach to explore joint efforts to find training solutions.

31. Others are of the view that it would be important to define what data need to be captured (such as a short learning game compared with a masterclass on the Sustainable Development Goals on an external platform) and the technical and administrative constraints and costs regarding mutual recognition would need to be taken into consideration.

32. Finally, those who consider that the proposed recommendation has already implemented do not see the need for inter-agency agreements to be established in order to facilitate it.

Recommendation 8

The governing bodies of United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2023, approve a common United Nations Organizational Learning Framework, agreed through relevant inter-agency mechanisms, which should contain a set of principles and a plan of action for gradual implementation.

33. Organizations note that this recommendation is addressed to their governing bodies.

34. Organizations agree with the aim of the recommendation, while noting that it has been attempted in the past, unsuccessfully. Such a framework should be future-focused and aligned with relevant existing best practice frameworks, as they do not recognize the need to create an entirely new United Nations framework.

35. Furthermore, any framework should be focused on the principles of maturity frameworks and allow for differences between entities, in terms of their specific learning priorities and the capability gaps to be addressed. Before committing to developing such a learning framework and a specific timeline, a discussion needs to be organized in the relevant inter-agency forum.

Recommendation 9

The Economic and Social Council should examine the possibility of revising the current mandate of the United Nations System Staff College, by the end of 2022, from both an operational and a financial perspective, in order to strengthen the College's role as a central learning hub of the United Nations system.

36. Organizations note this recommendation is addressed to the Economic and Social Council.

37. Organizations generally support the strengthening of the role of the United Nations System Staff College as a provider of learning within the United Nations system, which will lead to stronger and more systematic collaboration between learning entities. Existing bilateral and collective agreements between the Staff College and United Nations entities should be considered in the event that the Council revisits the mandate of the Staff College.

38. The United Nations System Staff College is certainly a key partner in several learning programmes related to learning needs with United Nations-specific content. However, other providers may be more suited for learning programmes that are not specific to the United Nations context. Efforts must also be made to strengthen the business model for more cost-effective pricing of programmes and services by the Staff College.

39. Several are of the view that for the United Nations System Staff College to function as the go-to training institute for United Nations staff, the review by the Economic and Social Council needs to establish a mechanism for Staff College courses to become more financially accessible and not hamper learning innovation within United Nations organizations.