Joint Inspection Unit
of the United Nations System

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and investigation"

Review Highlights   JIU/REP/2020/2
October 2020

POLICIES AND PLATFORMS IN SUPPORT OF LEARNING: TOWARDS MORE COHERENCE, COORDINATION AND CONVERGENCE

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Objectives

The main objective of this review is to identify and recommend ways to optimize the intellectual capital represented by the staff of the United Nations, by means of learning.

In addition, the review seeks to:

(a) Analyze the current status of policies and platforms supporting learning in the United Nations system and identify the potential for more coherence, coordination and convergence;

(b) Assess the extent to which inter-agency and system-wide collaboration is aligned with the needs arising from the 2030 Agenda and other strategic goals;

(c) Analyze the specific roles of various providers of learning services used in the United Nations system internally and externally;

(d) Examine the potential brought by e-learning platforms and other technology-based forms of learning for increased inter-agency coordination and collaboration.

Background

As the main asset of the United Nations system is its staff, learning is an indispensable tool in improving quality and efficiency. Through learning, staff can develop new knowledge and skills and acquire new competencies. Learning is not optional; it is a sine qua non condition for the organizations and their staff to be able to adapt in a highly competitive and dynamic environment.

The United Nations system cannot escape the transition to the future of work, which implies agility for organizations and continuous learning for individuals. According to recent studies, more than half of all employees in the world will require significant reskilling and upskilling in just the next three years. Such transformation can only be achieved by further learning.

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What the JIU found

1. The agreement that learning is strategic is not always substantiated by facts

While there is general agreement on the principle that learning is strategic in the life of any organization, in particular for the organizations of the United Nations system, which are catalysts and brokers of knowledge, the allocation of resources does not reflect this principle.

The review also found that some organizations take a narrow approach to learning and talent management, one that does not form part of a broader strategy in support of organizational effectiveness and increased competitiveness.

2. Creating a new culture of learning

A new culture of learning implies the understanding of a new reality, where learning also takes place beyond its traditional forms and can augment knowledge at all stages of an international civil servant's career. It is imperative that a new culture of learning and innovation should be developed, not just to keep up with new trends, but to maintain institutional relevance.

3. A comprehensive and systematic perspective on inter-agency cooperation is missing

A new collaborative system-wide culture of learning is simultaneously made necessary and facilitated by two major driving factors: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the opportunities provided by innovative technologies for interactive and continuous learning.

The fragmentation and uncoordinated nature of SDGs-related learning activities has led to a proliferation of courses and portals which may undermine the common vision of the United Nations and understanding of the role it is expected to play. In the absence of a comprehensive and systematic perspective on inter-agency cooperation, the review found conflicting views and lack of clarity as to which operational requirements are not sufficiently met at the system-wide level. However, the review highlights some recent steps that point to an increasing awareness of the need for more inter-agency cooperation on learning, such as the on-going UNSDG: Learn initiative.

4. The use of opportunities brought by new technologies remains random and inconsistent

The importance of technology-based learning platforms emerged as a key issue for the review.

In the United Nations system, innovation in learning through the use of new technologies is not an abstract concept. The growing digital infrastructure amplifies the ability of United Nations organizations to access and use nearly unlimited knowledge resources. The same technologies offer unprecedented networking options, which should be used for more coherence, coordination and convergence among the United Nations programmes, funds and specialized agencies at the system-wide level.

The importance of e-learning acquired a higher magnitude during the lockdown caused by the eruption of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. A by-product of the crisis was enhanced preparedness for, knowledge of and familiarity with e-learning practice across all hierarchical and professional horizons of United Nations staff, in the context of an unprecedented proliferation of e-learning solutions.

5. There is a need for more engagement and commitment by the staff themselves

The principle that learning is a responsibility shared by the Organization, its managers and each individual staff member is officially and widely recognized in the United Nations system. The report deals extensively with the duties of the organizations and the complex responsibilities of learning managers; the majority of recommendations are addressed to them. At the same time, the review found that staff engagement is not satisfactory.

The report also highlights the importance of personal initiatives and individual efforts of staff members in learning. While the responsibility of the organizations and managers is critical in creating an enabling environment for learning and talent development, it is also the duty of individual staff members to seek proactively to enrich their professional skills throughout their careers. Staff members should commit themselves to continuous learning.

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What the JIU Recommends

The report contains 9 recommendations addressed to governing bodies (2) and executive heads (7) and 17 soft recommendations addressed to executive heads and learning managers.

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 upon to the governing bodies.**

The abundance of courses, platforms and learning formats is not an assurance of relevance and efficiency. The learning content and instructional design must also be subject to careful selection. There is a need to improve the existing means of assessing the efficiency of learning programmes.

The review did not find any evidence of the existence of a systematic and comprehensive way of evaluating learning activities impact. The development of a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating the impact of learning activities and skills acquired by staff is identified as a key challenge, even in organizations with dedicated learning or talent management units and budgets.

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.**

While organizations have provisions for soliciting feedback from learners, the review could not identify, inter-alia, a training providers/instructors' network that feeds into learning policies or provides feedback and evaluation data that could be used for enhancing future learning activities.

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.**

Learning programmes on Sustainable Development Goals proliferate with no visible concern for coherence, coordination and convergence. The review found that there are many unexplored opportunities for improved efficiency in sharing resources and asking the most resourceful organizations to lead learning efforts and propose learning solutions and content on specific priorities, identifying synergies among learning solutions offered, in particular for courses related to the Sustainable Development Goals.

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.**

Learning is not the exclusive responsibility of the Organization. This recommendation is meant to fix the imbalance in the triple responsibility on learning by increasing motivation of the staff and the accountability of managers.

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.**

The scarcity of financial resources for learning does not justify lack of interest in valorizing other modalities for the provision of learning solutions. The use of open educational resources remains mostly unexplored by the responding organizations. Their use and curation require a certain investment in terms of time and resources and could be an obstacle for smaller organizations and those with limited learning resources. There is a considerable potential benefit, in particular for smaller organizations and those with limited learning budgets, of an inter-agency approach to the identification of open sources for the entire United Nations system.
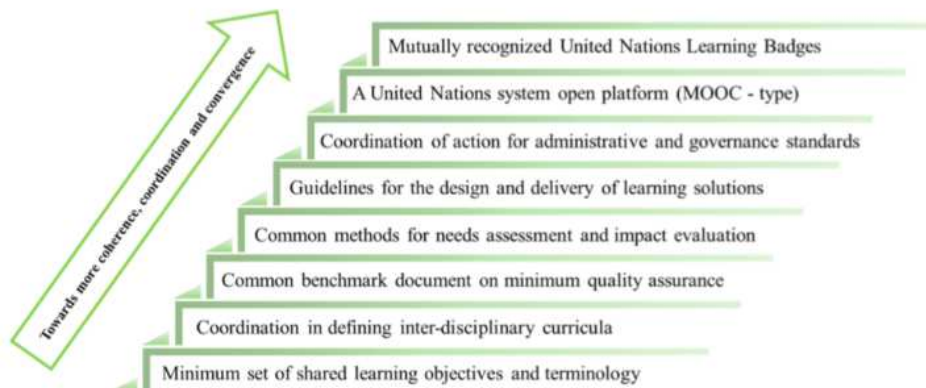
6 **The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should establish criteria for the more systematic use of external platforms, based on judicious curating of their courses and realistic learning objective.**

The use of external platforms is a reasonable solution for learning that can assist organizations to address challenges resulting from both a scarcity of resources and the need for diversity of learning topics. This modality of learning can supplement the in-house learning that organizations design and deliver with standardized learning programmes on many topics and save time and money for topics where appropriate ready-made content is found. The efficient use of digital technologies offers a great potential for learning purposes.

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.**

Such policies will stimulate mobility, coherence, cross-fertilization and system-wide knowledge building and serve the long-term aspiration for the United Nations organizations to become more agile.

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Figure 20 - Gradual steps towards more coherence, coordination and convergence

Towards more coherence, coordination and convergence

- Mutually recognized United Nations Learning Badges
- A United Nations system open platform (MOOC - type)
- Coordination of action for administrative and governance standards
- Guidelines for the design and delivery of learning solutions
- Common methods for needs assessment and impact evaluation
- Common benchmark document on minimum quality assurance
- Coordination in defining inter-disciplinary curricula
- Minimum set of shared learning objectives and terminology

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.**

The recommendation addresses the issue of a lack of a set of learning standards for the entire system. Such a move will be a step further in breaking the silos, expanding the vocation of the United Nations organizations to act like a genuine system, and serve better the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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.**

UNSSC was established as an institution for system-wide knowledge management, training and continuous learning for the staff of the United Nations system, in particular in the areas of economic and social development, peace and security and internal management. The College should be helped to play an enhanced role in providing learning services to the entire system, in particular to smaller organizations.

Approach and Methodology

Over 35 evaluation reports on training programmes – submitted by the participating organizations – were analysed (meta-evaluation and synthesis) in order to solicit relevant findings, conclusions and recommendations.

In addition to the data collected from the **28 participating organizations** through questionnaires, the review team consulted **external providers of e-learning services** and **other international organizations.**

JIU convened and co-organized **two round tables on e-learning** with participation from academia and digital e-learning platforms.

A system-wide global staff survey (9,564 respondents) was conducted in order to capture staff perception on learning needs and opportunities.
Use of the **R algorithm** for data mining in open questions to the survey.

25 face-to-face and online courses taken by the coordinating inspector
50 meetings, **227 interlocutors**
9 missions undertaken

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