Executive Board

Hundred and seventy-sixth session

176 EX/10

Item **10** of the provisional agenda

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL ON NEW STRATEGIC ORIENTATIONS FOR THE UNITWIN/UNESCO CHAIRS PROGRAMME

SUMMARY

The Director-General informs the Executive Board of the new strategic approach to the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme, which seeks to better align the Programme with UNESCO's priorities and strengthen international cooperation in the field of higher education and research especially on a South-South basis.

Decision proposed: paragraph 20.

BACKGROUND

1.   The UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme was launched in 1991 following a resolution by the General Conference at its 26th session (26 C/Resolution 1.1(c)). The Programme was created in response to a pressing need to reverse the process of decline of higher education institutions in developing countries, especially the least developed countries. Its aim was to: strengthen inter-university cooperation through the creation of an innovative modality for regional and international academic cooperation; facilitate the transfer, exchange and sharing of knowledge between institutions worldwide thus bridging the knowledge gap; encourage academic solidarity; assist the establishment of centres of excellence in developing countries; and stem the brain drain phenomenon.

2.   Due to the great demand by Member States and higher education institutions worldwide, the flow of requests and projects proceeded rapidly. Today, 15 years later, the Programme includes 661[1] Chairs and inter-university Networks in a wide range of disciplines and fields (Annex I).

3.   During this period, the Programme has generated a variety of successful endeavours, which are a source of inspiration for its future orientation. One remarkable example is the ORBICOM Communication Network which includes 25 UNESCO Chairs and over 200 associate members in the discipline and focuses on "monitoring the digital divide". Another is the UNITWIN Network on Inter-Religious Dialogue for Intercultural Understanding, regrouping 15 UNESCO Chairs whose activities aim at enhancing understanding among wider cultural and confessional communities. The UNESCO-Cousteau Ecotechnie Chair, sponsored by the Cousteau Foundation, is another example of success, involving over 15 UNESCO Chairs. Others include the UNESCO Chair in South-South Cooperation for Sustainable Development at the Federal University of Pará, Brazil, which cooperates with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as with other regions in the field of sciences; and the Global Network for Innovation in Higher Education (GUNI), which fosters cooperation and exchange between the different UNESCO Chairs in Higher Education in different regions of the world.

4.   The UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme has been reviewed by a number of conferences and meetings such as the World Conference on Higher Education, convened by UNESCO in 1998, and the World Forum of UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs convened by the Division of Higher Education in 2002, and by recent internal and external evaluations.[2]

5.   In general, these reviews concluded that the Programme has had many achievements, remains a major thrust in higher education, and is favoured by Member States and institutions. However, they also highlighted a number of shortcomings and challenges that need to be addressed including the geographical imbalance in favour of the North (Annex II); Chairs becoming inactive within few years of their creation; the lack of active interaction by a large number of Chairs; an "inflation" in the number of newly created Chairs with insufficient monitoring and networking of those already established; the problem of sustainability of projects particularly in terms of financial resources available; and the need to increasingly align Chairs with UNESCO's priorities. The review and evaluation exercises all recommended better planning, execution and implementation of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme.

6.   Based on these findings, as well as on consultations with various National Commissions, Chairholders and focal points of UNESCO programme sectors and other recommendations by different conferences and meetings, the *New Strategic Orientations for UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme* were presented and discussed during the Intersectoral Committee of UNITWIN in November 2006.

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[1]   Total number of projects established as at 24 January 2007.
[2]   One global internal evaluation was conducted by HED in 2005, an external evaluation was undertaken by SHS in 2006 and a review by the Science Sector.

7.   The expected results from launching the new strategy and putting it into operation can be summarized as follows:

- better alignment of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme with the overall objectives and sectoral priorities of the Organization as defined in draft documents 34 C/4 and 34 C/5;

- dynamic and effective interaction with UNESCO Chairs and Networks;

- strengthened triangular North-South-South cooperation through joint activities, transfer and exchange of knowledge;

- improved management and engagement in the intersectoral platforms as proposed in draft documents 34 C/4 and 34 C/5.

PROPOSED STRATEGIC APPROACH

8.   In the light of the above, and in line with the results-based, streamlined and strategic programming recommended by the Education Sector reform, this new strategic approach will adopt three orientations:

(i)   creation of a new generation of Chairs in line with UNESCO's programme objectives and priorities;

(ii)   systematic regrouping of Chairs into Networks (networking Chairs) and creation of dynamic networks (networking of networks); and

(iii)   transition from centres of excellence to poles of excellence within South-South cooperation dynamic.

CREATING A NEW GENERATION OF CHAIRS IN LINE WITH UNESCO'S PRIORITIES

9.   It is estimated that out of the 661 existing Chairs and Networks, 450 are presently active and only about two thirds of these are actually in the priority areas of UNESCO or the United Nations.

10.   It is in this context that this new strategic approach must take the following corrective measures: (i) creation of a new generation of Chairs that are sustainable and support UNESCO programme objectives and priorities, as defined in draft documents 34 C/4 and 34 C/5; and (ii) closure of inactive Chairs.[3] In both cases, the programme sectors, field offices, institutes and centres must cooperate with the coordinating unit of the Programme (Division of Higher Education in the Education Sector), and closely consult the relevant National Commissions.

11.   In addition to the traditional functions of a Chair, which include teaching, training, research and community outreach, the new generation of UNESCO Chairs and Networks will have to meet the following new criteria: (a) be in a priority programme area; (b) be easily integrated into an existing network or systematically grouped into priority areas; (c) provide concrete evidence of sustainability; and (d) cover North-South and/or South-South cooperation dimension.

12.   Adopting this strategic approach and criteria will help to strengthen the interaction between UNESCO and the Chairs/Networks by facilitating their involvement in the conception, implementation and evaluation of UNESCO's programmes and activities in addition to serving as think-tanks and bridge-builders between research and civil society, and between research and policy-making.

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3   This will be done in line with the recommendations of the external evaluators as presented in document 161 EX/42 and subsequent 161 EX/Decision 9.1 on the closure of inactive Chairs.

13.   This approach will also contribute to slowing down the growth in the number of new Chairs to enable a gradual and manageable development of the Programme with more emphasis on quality rather than on quantity,[4] notably in the relevance, follow-up, monitoring and impact of projects.

SYSTEMATIC REGROUPING OF CHAIRS INTO NETWORKS

14.   The idea behind this approach is to regroup a number of established Chairs working in similar fields, disciplines or priority areas into networks with the purpose of strengthening interregional and international academic cooperation for the benefit of developing countries. UNESCO Chairs that work in isolation have shown to be less effective and have minimal impact on national economic and human development and are rendered no different from any other academic Chair in a given university.

15.   The regrouping of Chairs will lead progressively to more functional and dynamic interdisciplinary networks thereby contributing to the intersectoral actions of the Organization which will be the main thrust of its Medium-Term Strategy. Furthermore, these networks would allow for better communication and information exchange; adoption of common strategies and joint interdisciplinary research programmes; facilitation of exchange and mobility of academics, researchers and students through the Academics Across Borders (AAB) initiative; and the development of interregional dialogue projects such as the Asia-Africa University Dialogue on Basic Education co-funded by JFIT.

FROM CENTRES TO POLES OF EXCELLENCE

16.   In their initial conceptualization, it was envisaged that UNESCO Chairs, particularly those established in developing countries, should gradually grow into centres of excellence for advanced training and research in key areas of sustainable development. However, experience shows that due to various constraints (financial and human) only a few have become firmly engaged along this line. Evidence indicates that institutions in most developing countries have neither the means nor the capacity to develop the necessary critical mass for advanced research and training. The transnational division of tasks, based on regional cooperation, with strong international support, is both a necessity and an opportunity for these institutions to advance. The UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme is an ideal means to reach this goal, and partnership between existing centres along the North-South and South-South axes, especially at the subregional level, is a crucial element. It is in this context that a *transition from centres to poles of excellence* should constitute one of the major axes for the future orientation of the Programme.

17.   In this respect, the development of poles of excellence, particularly among developing countries in a given geographical space, will seek to build a synergy among universities, higher learning institutions, training centres, foundations and public or private research centres around innovating common projects. This partnership will be built along specific themes or fields falling within UNESCO's priority areas. It will be ensured that a critical mass of capacity will be involved to ensure quality. These poles of excellence could eventually prove to be a useful means of reversing the phenomenon of brain drain into brain gain in developing countries.

18.   UNESCO will play a proactive role in mobilizing extrabudgetary resources for the development and establishment of these poles of excellence. It will utilize its Academics Across Borders (AAB) initiative to facilitate the exchange of scientists, academics, researchers and students among and between these poles to encourage North-South and South-South mobility.

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[4]   During 2005, 33 projects were established and the number doubled in 2006.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGIC APPROACH

19.   With the aim of optimizing the full potential of the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme in all UNESCO's fields of competence, and in order to implement the above strategic approach, more specifically UNESCO will:

(i)   work in consultation with National Commissions in drawing up new criteria for the establishment of UNESCO Chairs as well as performance indicators for the monitoring and evaluation of all Chairs and Networks to ensure their sustainability;

(ii)   associate more systematically, and when relevant, the UNESCO Chairs and Networks in the conceptualization, implementation and evaluation of the Organization's programmes and activities;

(iii)   reinforce its advisory role to the Chairs/Networks in orienting research projects, their activities and training programmes;

(iv)   strengthen its catalytic role in the enhancement of partnerships and networks;

(v)   play a proactive role in funds mobilization and engage in a more systematic manner in extrabudgetary fundraising, particularly vis-à-vis the private sector, for the benefit of projects in developing and least developed countries;

(vi)   set a list of priority areas (approximately 15) in which Chairs should be created, based on the main strategic objectives of the Medium-Term Strategy (2008-2013);

(vii)   close inactive Chairs or Chairs which have accomplished their missions in line with the measures established as follow-up to the recommendations of the external evaluators (161 EX/42) and in conformity with Articles 14 and 15 of the Agreement on the Establishment of a UNESCO Chair;

(viii) offer, when appropriate, the possibility to universities or higher education institutions to take part in UNITWIN Networks as an alternative to the creation of a new UNESCO Chair;

(ix)   reinforce intersectoral cooperation and coordination of field offices, institutes and centres as an important factor in the efficient implementation and monitoring of projects through the Intersectoral Committee for UNITWIN and small working groups by themes and priority areas;

(x)   simplify internal procedures for the establishment of new projects.

PROPOSED DRAFT DECISION

20.   In the light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

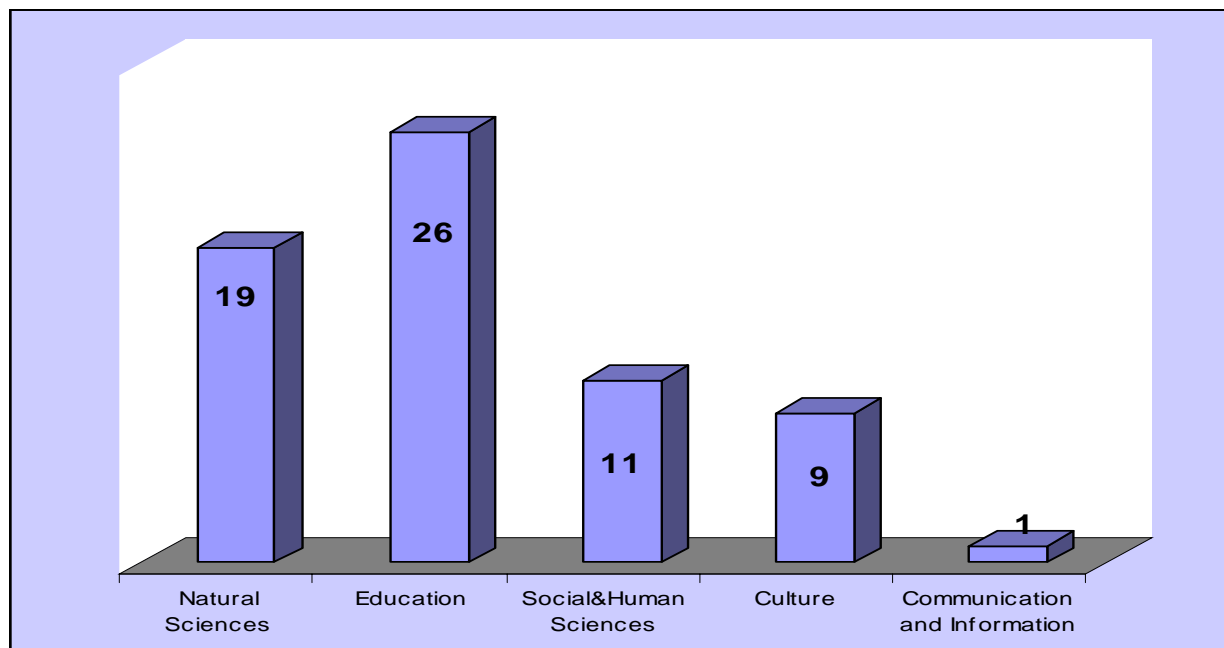The Executive Board,

1.   Recalling 26 C/Resolution 1.1(c) and 161 EX/Decision 9.1,

2.   Having examined document 176 EX/10,

3.   Bearing in mind the strong emphasis on results-based programming and enhanced intersectorality in draft documents 34 C/4 and 34 C/5,

4.   <u>Takes note</u> of the increasing geographical imbalance of UNESCO Chairs in favour of the North, the need for a systematic regrouping of Chairs into dynamic networks with the objective of increasing North-South and South-South cooperation; and the many benefits of moving from the concept of centres of excellence to poles of excellence;

5.   <u>Takes note with satisfaction</u> of the Director-General's new strategic approach for the UNITWIN/UNESCO Chairs Programme to address these issues and challenges which will be implemented after the 176th session.
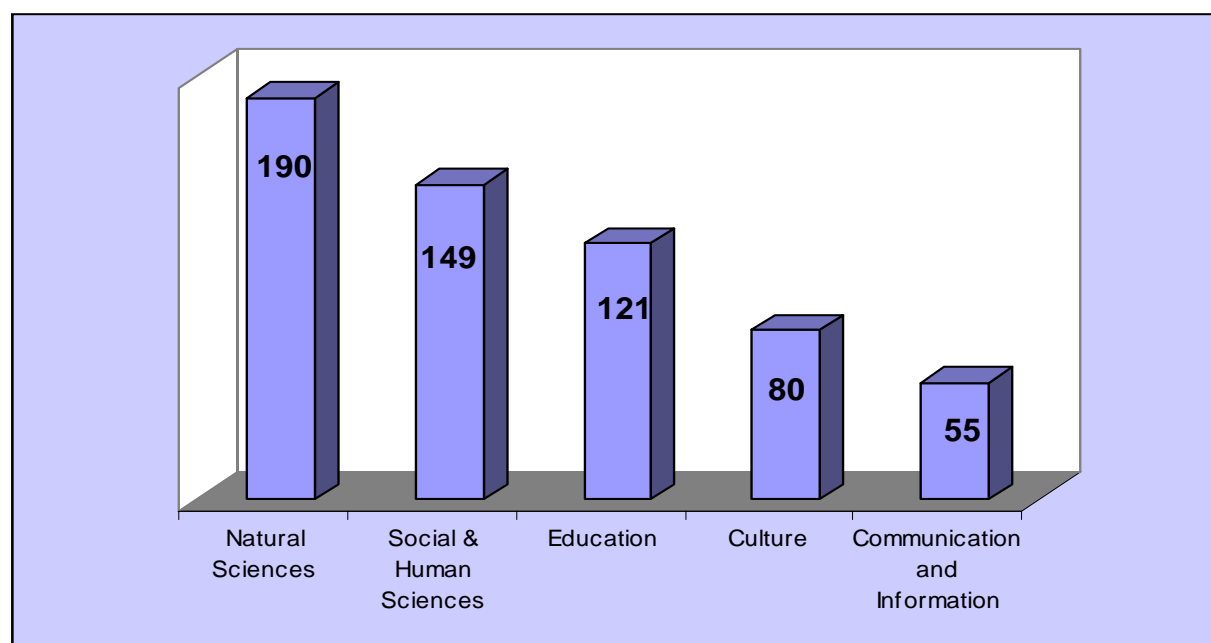
ANNEX I

DISTRIBUTION BY FIELD/DISCIPLINE

UNITWIN Networks (66)

UNESCO Chairs (595)[5]

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[5]   The Programme started its conceptualization in 1989, and there were only two Chairs under trial during the launching of the Programme in 1991.

ANNEX II

**595 UNESCO CHAIRS
DISTRIBUTION BY REGION
AS AT 24 JANUARY 2007**