

LINKING UN-HABITAT AND UNIVERSITIES

HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF
KNOWLEDGE PARTNERSHIPS

UN HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Melbourne Centre
for Cities

UN HABITAT

FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

LINKING UN-HABITAT AND UNIVERSITIES HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF KNOWLEDGE PARTNERSHIPS

REPORT AUTHORS

Michele Acuto, Director, Melbourne Centre for Cities, and professor of urban politics, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, the University of Melbourne.

Carolina Mayen Huerta, Research Assistant, Melbourne Centre for Cities, and Graduate Researcher, Faculty of Science, the University of Melbourne.

PROJECT SUPERVISOR

Raphaelle Vignol, Capacity Development and Training Unit, Programme Development Branch, UN-Habitat.

REPORT CONTRIBUTORS

Liyana Yusof; David Evans; Vasko Vidar; Matthew Nelms, Mariana Lessa Voita, Capacity Development and Training Unit, Programme Development Branch, UN-Habitat.

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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.

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LINKING UN-HABITAT AND UNIVERSITIES

A REVIEW BY THE MELBOURNE CENTRE FOR CITIES
FOR UN-HABITAT'S CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT & 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 AND ACROSS A VAST GEOGRAPHY OF COLLABORATIONS INTERNATIONALLY. 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 this report 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 report 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 its direction.

REPORT OUTLINE

This report includes several sections aimed at unpacking university partnerships from UN-Habitat's point of view. First, we provide a summary review of Habitat UNI's history between 2008 and 2021 – an analysis that is also more extensively detailed in [Annex 1](#) to this report. This is then followed by two empirical sections providing both an ‘insider’ and a ‘partner’ perspective detailing UN-Habitat staff and academics' insights as to the opportunities and challenges of partnering. This is followed by a summary of the key ‘knowledge products’ of university partnerships – an analysis that also draws on the more extensive ‘compendium’ of partnership case studies in [Annex 2](#).

These considerations are, in the following chapter, applied specifically to the issue of implementing the New Urban Agenda. The report is then rounded off by two sets of conclusions. First, one detailing more generally the key lessons for university partnerships emerging across all the empirical material we gathered. Second, presenting a suite of recommendations as to how to enhance Habitat UNI in relation to these more general themes.

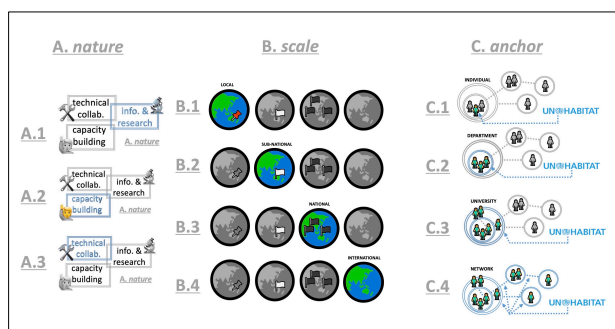
METHODS

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 March 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, a series of 12 anonymised [in-depth interviews](#) with key informants engaged with Habitat UNI and UN-Habitat-university partnerships. Third, three [semi-quantitative surveys](#) inquiring about the challenges and opportunities of universities partnerships. These relied on responses by 84 UN-Habitat staff and 121 academics. Fourth, this approach was complemented by 2 [focus groups](#), one held with UN-Habitat staff, one academics drawing on Habitat UNI member institutions and individuals. 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.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

To frame its analysis the report details and applies a proposed **university partnerships framework**. The framework is designed as a method to compare the modalities of university partnerships via three sets of features (nature, scale and anchor) each identifying different principal focuses of university partnerships - designed for specific elements of these features to also work in overlap.



The framework goes hand in hand with a **typology of knowledge products** of university partnerships. These partnerships are seen to entail the production of six main types of knowledge products: Instruction, Data and Research, Education, Advocacy and Policy, Convening, Technology and Digital Tools. The framework and typology of knowledge products are applied in the report to both Habitat UNI specifically and a discussion of UN-Habitat-university partnerships more generally. They also underpin the compendium of case studies detailed in [annex 2](#) to the report.

<p>1. Instruction products KPs aimed explicitly at providing guidance and direction Guides; Analytical toolkits; Frameworks; Agendas (application/implementation); Advice and consultancy</p>	<p>4. Advocacy and policy products KPs aimed explicitly at shaping urban governance and management Strategies and plans; Policy (design, delivery, implementation); Campaigns; Awareness programs</p>
<p>2. Data and research products KPs aimed principally at providing analysis and assessment and/or at information dissemination Profiles and monitoring; Datasets; Reviews; Reports</p>	<p>5. Convening products KPs aimed linking and convening stakeholders Summits; Workshops; Networks; Participatory processes</p>
<p>3. Education products KPs aimed capacity building and skills enhancement Courses and modules; Curricula and degrees; Academies and training institutions; Staff development; Studios and student competitions</p>	<p>6. Building and technology products Material KPs resulting from the development of new infrastructures or technologies (including digital ones) Planning and designing; Construction analytics; Certification and operation management; Prototypes and patents; Technologies and tools</p>

UNIVERSITIES AND THE NUA

In chapter 8 of the report, we turn to a specific consideration of how UN-Habitat-university partnerships can be leveraged to implement the United Nations' New Urban Agenda (NUA), an action-oriented statement adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in 2016. We do so by analysing the UN Secretary General's two Quadrennial Reports on the NUA (2018 and 2022) as well as the academic literature available to date on this theme. We stress how the New Urban Agenda text itself called explicitly to work with academia and research institutions, but also how academia has received mixed attention in the Quadrennial Reports and in turn how academia has

offered a mixed scorecard of its actual implementation. We note how other agendas have taken greater and more documented purchase onto academia especially when it comes to SDGs and climate action, and that the implementation of the NUA via and with academia still requires much more significant buy-in (both financially and capacity wise) from universities. We stress three opportunity points. First, that of better **leveraging educational networking opportunities to strengthen visibility of the NUA**. Second, that of **valuing the boundary positioning of universities**, which could be able to provide valuable bridging and brokering governance functions to better mainstream the NUA. And third, the urgency of **enhancing the profile of university-city partnerships** in NUA practices, marketing and implementation.

KEY REPORT THEMES

There are broadly five major themes recurring throughout our study:

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.

SURVEY DATA SNAPSHOT

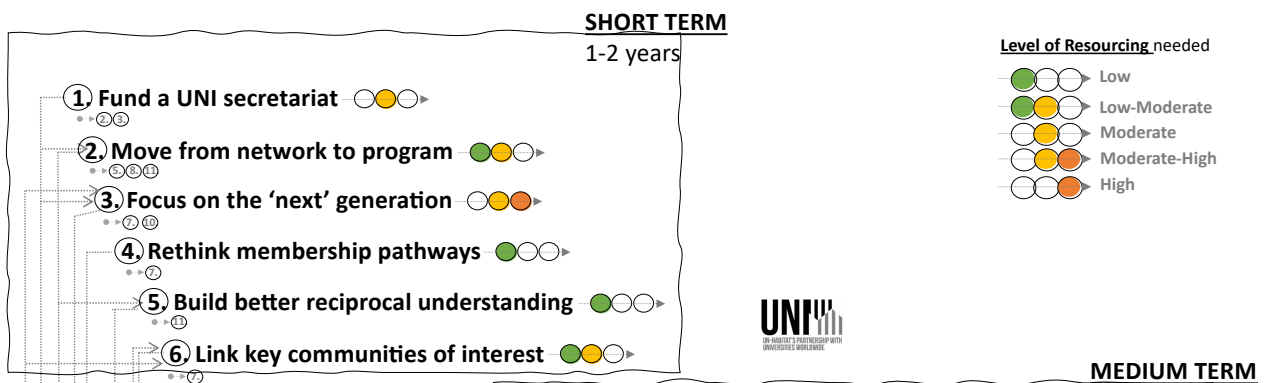
Whilst we offer a wide discussion of the landscape and features of university partnerships in chapters 4 and 5, we detail in the next page a brief visual comparison of some key issues pertaining to major challenges and opportunities identified by 205 survey participants.

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



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