

**EVALUATION OF THE UNITED
NATIONS UNIVERSITY – THE
RESEARCH AND TRAINING
PROGRAMME ON COMPARATIVE
REGIONAL INTEGRATION
STUDIES (UNU-CRIS)**

Executive Summary

On behalf of:

**Flemish Government
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Performed by:

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Brussels, August 2009

EVALUATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY – THE RESEARCH AND TRAINING PROGRAMME ON COMPARATIVE REGIONAL INTEGRATION STUDIES (UNU-CRIS)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supra-national regions such as Europe and local regions such as Flanders are increasingly becoming important global players alongside nation-states. In light of this development the United Nations University (UNU), a United Nations think tank, launched a research and training programme on regional integration in 2001. The research and training programme, called UNU-CRIS (Comparative Regional Integration Studies), has settled in Bruges and is mainly funded by the Flemish Government.¹ With the perspective of a new funding period (2010-2014), the Flemish department of Economy, Science and Innovation (EWI) proceeded evaluating UNU-CRIS, as stipulated in the current Memorandum of Understanding. The evaluation study was performed by IDEA Consult (Brussels).

Introduction

The evaluation of UNU-CRIS was focussed on four principal activity domains and three critical input factors:

1. Research;
2. Capacity building;
3. Policy advice and relevance;
4. Communication;
5. Financial resources;
6. Human resources;
7. Institutional embedding.

Extensive desk research, several in-depth interviews and a peer review with international experts, generated substantial quantitative and qualitative information on these aspects.

Research

'Regional integration' is a broad, horizontal field that can be linked to diverse disciplines and in which a variety of themes can be studied. Regional integration (arrangements be-

tween regions or nations) has the potential to enhance welfare, promote growth and foster peace and stability. The last years, UNU-CRIS organised its research in four clusters (socio-economic development, peace and security, governance and monitoring).

UNU-CRIS is very productive in publishing books and articles on regional integration world-wide. With this, they exceed by far the targets outlined by UNU and the academic standards. The quality of the publications is quite high as well, as it is usually published in journals from the academic sub top. However, the scope of four research domains seems too ambitious. In our evaluation we found that UNU-CRIS could not equally cover all research themes.

Also, the comparative and interdisciplinary approach, which UNU-CRIS claims to incorporate, could be applied more consequently. Furthermore, UNU-CRIS is more successful in the research itself (theoretical or empirical) than in the valorisation of

¹ The objectives and conditions attached to the funding are stipulated in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Flemish Community represented by its government on the one hand and the United Nations University and the College of Europe on the other hand



UNU-CRIS is very productive in publishing books and articles on regional integration world-wide (photo: premises UNU-CRIS, Bruges)

its research into practical tools, methods and instruments to support its stakeholders or to underpin the policymaking process.

UNU-CRIS is well integrated in scientific networks and collaborates with scientific partners all over the world. Although the partners are mainly international (81%), also the Flemish universities are involved in UNU-CRIS projects, sometimes occasionally, sometimes intensively and on a structural basis.

Capacity building

As a UN institute, UNU-CRIS has the ambition to spread knowledge and good practices on regional integration world-wide by organising trainings for students and professionals. UNU-CRIS spreads a lot of volunta-

rism regarding this capacity building objective, but it mostly seems to take the form of ad hoc initiatives. To gain structural effects, capacity building initiatives must be embed-

ded in structural relationships. Until 2008, the structural partnerships of UNU-CRIS regarding capacity building were limited.

The recent NETRIS project may be a breakthrough in the capacity building activities of UNU-

CRIS, as it entails the opportunity to develop structural partnerships with academic institutions in the ACP-countries (African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States).

Also, UNU-CRIS has hosted some internships and supervised some PhD students from both Flemish universities and developing countries. Within the European GARNET project, UNU-CRIS was successful in organising a PhD school on international scale

“UNU-CRIS’ scientific work is of a high level, but the valorisation towards practice and policymaking could be further developed”

with the ULB (the French speaking University in Brussels).

Policy advice and relevance

The policy relevance of UNU-CRIS is most explicit on the international scene. The institute has been significantly present and active both within the UN and increasingly within the European Commission. For instance in the period 2004-2006, UNU-CRIS was in very close partnership with the UN Security Council in modelling the role of regional organisations in peacekeeping and security. UNU-CRIS also generated policy returns towards Belgium and Flanders (e.g. the preparatory study on the renewal of the Benelux treaty, 2006), but the establishment of an own "Steunpunt" for policy research on foreign policy by the Flemish Government has reduced the opportunities for UNU-CRIS to perform specific relevant policy work. Since 2006 UNU-CRIS has become more and more active in civil society organisations, permitting it to still indirectly reach Flemish policy makers, while at the same time being increasingly connected and embedded locally.

A critic mainly coming from the expert panel was that the policy advice should be more targeted towards the

struments, i.e. the website and the electronic newsletter (almost monthly) are of good quality, and interest is growing. However, we advise a profound analysis of the spread of these media, aimed at strengthening their coverage of all target groups and stakeholders. Especially the regional organisations, the developing countries and the Flemish government should be better covered.

This brings us to the more general finding that UNU-CRIS has some principles on communication, but lacks a consistent communication strategy. This gap should be filled in the coming period, not only towards its target groups, but also to inform the general public in Flanders and abroad about the relevance of the UNU-CRIS research.

Financial resources

Assessing the performance of an organisation like UNU-CRIS obviously has to take into account the available financial resources.

The research centre receives an annual grant of about 1 million EUR from the Flemish Government, which gives it a relative stable financial base, obviously under the condition that UNU-CRIS performs as laid

"UNU-CRIS suffers from a structural inability to match its financial resources with its own ambitions and the demands put upon it by both the Flanders government and the UN"

developing countries. Much policy relevant knowledge could be transferred to those parts, where it would have high added value

Communication

To increase the outreach of its activities, communication is an important aspect of UNU-CRIS' activities. UNU-CRIS' general communication in-

down in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

UNU-CRIS is also successful in attracting external funds, especially from the European Commission. The annual rate of 20% external funding, concurred with the Flemish government in the MoU, is largely attained. For the coming years the external project funding will grow further.

The overall success in attracting project funding from the European Framework programmes, demonstrates the quality of the UNU-CRIS' project proposals, as the competition in these programmes is very fierce.

Compared to other UNU research centres/programmes, UNU-CRIS is a rather small research centre, with limited resources. The experts concluded that UNU-CRIS suffers from a structural inability to match its financial resources with its own ambitions and the demands put upon it by both the Flemish government and the UN. The implications of this conclusion for potential recommendations will become clear below.

Human resources

During the evaluation period (2005-2009) UNU-CRIS employed on average 13 persons. Four of them are senior researchers; the other researchers are junior and project researchers.

Over the same period quite a high turn over in staff has taken place, and some senior researchers left UNU-CRIS. This is regrettable, as given the limited size of the senior staff, this directly affects the continuity of the research domains.

However, this situation could also be an opportunity for UNU-CRIS to fill the vacancies with excellent new researchers. UNU-CRIS and its work have since 2007 become increasingly recognised by the wider academic community. This enables the institute to be more selective in attracting future staff members. Plans are currently being developed and put in place to strengthen the human resources.

Related to this, the experts suggested to shift the orientation of the staff, which is mainly European at the moment, more towards the developing parts of the world, as these usually are the subject of research of UNU-CRIS.

Institutional embedding

UNU-CRIS is well embedded and an active partner in the UN-family. Especially, close contacts are established with UN Brussels, UNESCO, UNDP and other UNUs. Furthermore, a structural active interrelation seems to grow between UNU-CRIS and the European Commission, one of the main project funders of UNU-CRIS.

Additionally, UNU-CRIS has a wide and strong network with academic institutions across (western) Europe. It also maintains a high amount of contacts with the Flemish academic world. However, the links to Flemish and Belgian government bodies are rather weak.

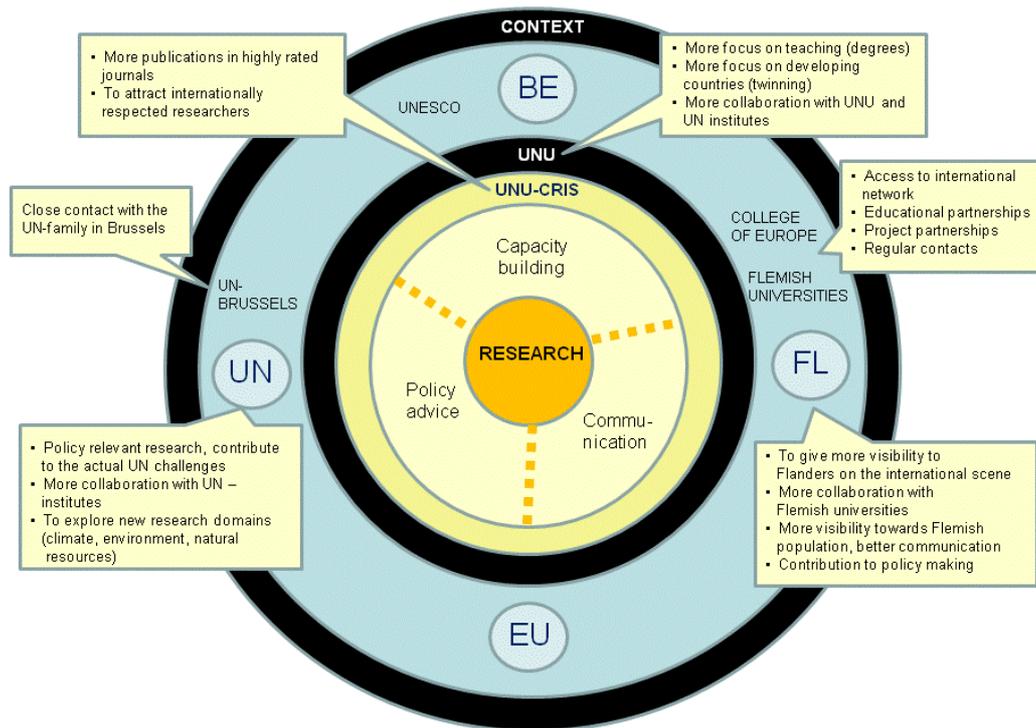
The main potential for the future consists of improving the relationships with the developing countries, with the regional arrangements worldwide and with the Flemish government as a main stakeholder.

Stakeholder expectations

UNU-CRIS has to operate in an extremely difficult and complicating context, in which several stakeholders each impose their expectations and demands upon the institute. Identification of the expectations of both the side of the UN and its university, and the side of Flanders (government and academic scene), showed that UNU-CRIS has to deal not only with high, but also sometimes conflicting expectations.

The UN expects policy and capacity building returns on a global level, whereas Flanders expects them on a local level. Furthermore, UNU-CRIS itself is very ambitious with respect to the academic side.

A complicating factor is that the expectations are in certain cases not very explicit, and lack well-defined quantifiable targets.



UNU-CRIS has to deal not only with high, but also sometimes conflicting expectations from its several stakeholders

The challenge for the future is to formulate a satisfactory strategy, agreed on by all stakeholders, in relation to the limited financial means.

General conclusions

The evaluation has first of all made clear that the scale of UNU-CRIS and its work is too limited to establish a true world-wide 'impact'. This does not mean the institute has done a bad job, quite the opposite. All international experts agreed that, within its resource limits, UNU-CRIS performs very well.

- UNU-CRIS is especially productive in its scientific work, which is also more pronounced than the output in terms of capacity building and policy advice.
- As an evident consequence of its mission and embedding, UNU-CRIS' impact is mostly international. The returns towards the Belgium and Flemish community are more limited.

- The high amount of external project funding UNU-CRIS was able to attract, reflects a strong entrepreneurial spirit within the institute. This is a necessary condition to handle its complex stakeholders' context.

Besides this overall positive appreciation, there is still an array of possibilities to upgrade the performance of UNU-CRIS and to raise its impact:

- The scope of UNU-CRIS' activities and research is too large and could be more focused. This will increase the effectiveness of the (limited) resources, which are now scattered over several activities and domains.
- UNU-CRIS should realise more that its work ultimately has to contribute to policy making and solving global pressing problems. The essential step towards valorising the research work to policy makers and society is too often lacking.

- However, the target groups for UNU-CRIS do not always seem to be fully clear. These should first be carefully selected and defined, based on where UNU-CRIS can generate most added value. This would enlarge the relevance of UNU-CRIS and differentiate it more clearly from other research institutes on regional integration.

Recommendations

1. Assign priorities in overall positioning and in actions

In a scenario in which the core funding from Flanders remains the same, certain choices will have to be made. Not all stakeholder expectations can be explicitly addressed; for example the organisation of a master programme is not realistic at this moment. Taking these expectations into account, UNU-CRIS has to develop and take its own strategic course. The institute should prioritise its activities, and specialise on a limited agenda.

Furthermore, UNU-CRIS cannot be a think tank, a research centre and a university at the same time. Supported by the expert panel, we recommend positioning UNU-CRIS as a (policy) think tank, for which sound research is the basis for well-underpinned policy advice.

2. Focus the research activities and complement them with a network approach

We recommend narrowing down the number of research domains. The experts sympathise with the idea of purely concentrating on the more horizontal and institutional (governmental) aspects of regional integration. This knowledge can be applied to every regional arrangement world-wide, for instance through monitoring activities like the RIKS database.

To complement this fundamental and horizontal approach with applied research on actual UN-themes e.g. security, human rights and environment, the existing network approach (working with associates) must be further developed. The prestige and the unique position of the United Nations must be fully used to link world-wide renowned academics to the centre.

3. Apply the specific comparative approach more consistently

The *comparative* study of regional integration world-wide is what makes UNU-CRIS unique. In the future, UNU-CRIS should more consequently apply this approach in all of its research. This will strengthen its distinctiveness and generate policy relevant research conclusions on practical questions (e.g. what makes a certain regional arrangement more successful compared to others?).

4. Consider research as a necessary core activity, not as the final objective

As stated in the charter of the United Nations University, UNU-CRIS' final objective is to help the international community in solving global problems. Therefore, we consider the institutes' research as instrumental to the policy objective, not as the final outcome. Excellent research work is necessary as a basis for policy advice and capacity building initiatives, but without return towards the international community this research is not serving the UNU objectives.

5. Put more emphasis on the valorisation of the research

In order to actually contribute to solving world pressing problems, it is important that the research findings

**"Making choices"
is the central issue
in the expert
recommendations
towards
UNU-CRIS**

of UNU-CRIS are widely spread to political and societal organisations. In this respect, more effort could be put in 'translating' the research output into short policy briefs and articles for a wider public. As an expert lapidary summarised: 'no book without a policy brief'. Putting more emphasis on these outreach activities, UNU-CRIS could also increase the attention for the Flemish public.

6. More orientation towards developing countries

The geographical focus of UNU-CRIS is largely European at the moment. However, we conclude that UNU-CRIS can realise more added value towards the development countries. Therefore, we recommend establishing and intensifying the relationships with academics, policymakers and regional organisations in the developing countries. This would strongly contribute to the institutes' relevance and impact. We advise taking on a cooperative and participative approach and looking for collaboration with local partners (academics, publishers, training institutes ...).

Twinning initiatives fit within this priority, but seem not realistic in the current social-economic climate, as they require funding by the host country. Interviewing representatives of the Flemish Government suggested that at the moment there is no budget available for this initiative.

7. UNU-CRIS should not overplay its hand on education

Instigated by the UNU, UNU-CRIS is currently exploring the possibilities to further develop its education and capacity building component, e.g. through the development of Master/PhD programmes. However, the experts expressed some clear feasibility concerns, as they are afraid that for a small organisation as UNU-CRIS, these activities are at the expense of the existing research activities.

Rather than on a master programme, the expert panel suggested to target the capacity building initiatives in first place towards officials and policy makers in the developing countries. An alternative suggestion is to develop UNU-CRIS more as a post doctoral research institute. This needs less staffing, and EU funding is available for it. Moreover, it would upgrade the level of the staff, which nowadays consists of mostly doctoral or even master students.

8. Improving the organisation and the processes

We advise to strengthen the organisational structure and formalise some important processes. We see three main action lines:

- Strengthening **Human resources** through increasing the senior staff to a critical mass of 7 (which would imply a raise of Flemish funding), introducing a more formal personnel evaluation system, and/or starting the transformation towards a post-doctoral institute.
- Formalising the **quality control** on the academic output, in which the senior staff supervises the junior staff
- Formulating and implementing a consistent **communication strategy** towards all target groups and satisfying the different stakeholders.

Strategic plan 2010-2014

The UNU-CRIS draft strategic plan 2010-2014 contains a new mission and five strategic ambitions for the coming years. IDEA Consult has analysed the plan and formulated recommendations for finalising it, by confronting it with the SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) in the report.

UNU-CRIS seems to be aware of its **strengths** and attempts to take advantage of them, again demonstrat-

ing its entrepreneurial attitude. In the plan, UNU-CRIS integrates all stakeholders' expectations and raises its ambition to attract external funding to 33% of its core income.

The plan also includes important initiatives in relation to the **weaknesses**. First of all, the returns towards Flanders are made more explicit. Secondly, UNU-CRIS will pay more attention to quality control and personnel evaluation, although this is not further detailed. Finally, UNU-CRIS will focus its capacity building initiatives more on civil servants and regional organisations in the developing countries. This is in line with the recommendations, although the capacity building initiatives remain 'project based' and not 'structural'. Also, partners for this should be selected from a more strategic point of view.

Some essential weaknesses are still not addressed in the draft strategic plan. The main aim of any strategic plan is actually to formulate and explain strategic choices for the future. This 'strategic plan', however, is a well structured list of desiderata, re-

sponding to each expectation of the principal stakeholders. In consultation with these stakeholders, UNU-CRIS has to put the ambitions in a more realistic perspective.

Furthermore, the specific scope of the research (comparative, interdisciplinary), its valorisation, and the communication strategy are aspects that are not addressed enough in the plan and should receive more attention (see recommendations).

Related to the **opportunities**, the plan expresses the wish to fill the recent vacancies with highly renowned researchers, although the actual strategy for this is not elaborated. Second, the cooperation with the College of Europe will be extended with the development of a research master. The evaluation points to some clear risks in pursuing this intention (too little resources). Third, UNU-CRIS names an opportunity to expand its presence in the UNU-system, although this would imply an additional cost for Flanders. Finally, the plan does unsurprisingly not mention responses to the growing demand for UNU-CRIS' ser-



UNU-CRIS' activities should be oriented more towards developing countries, to increase added value.

vices, as the necessary resources for this are lacking.

Major **threat** is the insufficient core funding in relation to the mission and the stakeholders expectations. The plan works out three future funding scenarios:

- Consolidating the strengths of UNU-CRIS (*core-funding of €1.565.000/year*);
- Expanding the Flemish presence in the UNU-system (*core-funding of €1.720.000/year*);
- Scaling down expectations (*core funding stays the same at €1.045.000/year*)

It is fundamental that this issue is cleared before the strategic plan is finalised. Choices can only be made in function of a clear perspective on the future core funding. The signing of the new Memorandum of Understanding for the period 2010-2014 can thus be seized as an opportunity to do a fundamental reflection on the mission of UNU-CRIS, its long-term perspective, and the necessary core funding in relation to this. We recommend involving both the EWI department and the department 'Internationaal Vlaanderen' in this, as

UNU-CRIS' activities are not only related to sciences, but also to international policy and developing cooperation/aid with or to developing countries.

With respect to this, the expectations and the engagements of all parties involved (especially UNU and the Flemish Government) should be formulated more clearly in the next MoU. Besides, they should be translated in explicit deliverables and indicators which can together form an integrated monitoring system for the performance of UNU-CRIS.

In defining the objectives, it is important that the Flemish government takes into account the international mission and position of UNU-CRIS. The returns to be expected from UNU-CRIS towards the Flemish level may not mortgage the commitments of UNU-CRIS within the international UNU context. The returns for Flanders must be seen crossing its own borders. The work of UNU-CRIS entails a concrete and important contribution of Flanders towards the international community. From that perspective the UNU-CRIS services fit in the policy line of 'science sharing' from Flanders towards the South.

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