

UniPID comment

23.5.2014

**Draft report on the Evaluation of Finland's support to higher education institutions – North-South-South and HEI ICI programmes**

In this statement the UniPID network summarizes its comments and views on the draft report on the Evaluation of Finland's Support to Higher Education Institutions – the North-South-South and HEI ICI programmes. This statement is based on a discussion by the UniPID Board, which consists of representatives from the UniPID member universities specialized in development issues in their own fields of expertise, and many of whom also have experience coordinating a HEI ICI and/or NSS project.

In general, UniPID finds the evaluation process and the report draft very positive and competent, and would like to use this opportunity to congratulate the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Finnish Consulting Group (FCG) for a successful evaluation process thus far. In this statement, we focus particularly on the suggested recommendations, since the project coordinators have been given the possibility to comment on the specific project-related sections separately. UniPID generally supports and agrees with the recommendations given in the report, thus this statement will focus particularly on the more complicated recommendations, which we recommend modifying or clarifying. These focus particularly on the recommendations related to merging the two programmes, the inclusion of joint research as a capacity building activity, the amount of resources and size of the projects, the strategic guidance of the project content and the selection of the project partners, and the roles of the MFA and CIMO in the programmes.

Most importantly, we strongly agree with the recommendation to increase and prioritize Finnish development funding for higher education and research capacity building. As the report states, Finland is recognizing the importance of higher education (HE) and research for development, but this is not matched in terms of resources. The role of higher education institutions (HEI) and the research community should be strengthened in Finnish development cooperation by securing sufficient resources to implement meaningful cooperation.

The evaluation report recommends merging the NSS and HEI ICI programmes to exploit the synergies of the two programmes and eliminate the unproductive separation of the activities that are all part of and support HEI basic functions and their development. UniPID agrees with this recommendation to create one funding instrument with an enhanced focus on comprehensive and long-term capacity development of the partner institutions. However, UniPID suggests that there should still be enough flexibility within this instrument to create projects that focus on certain functions according to the partner institutions' needs and the Finnish partners' expertise. Every project does not need to include every activity.

UniPID agrees with the recommendation to include financial support for degree training of academic staff of the partner institutions. UniPID also strongly agrees with the inclusion of joint research activities in the new programme to strengthen the research capacities of the partner institutions. However, in a capacity building project, joint research should be considered as capacity building activity, which is not funded on the same basis as other Finnish development research. UniPID disagrees with the suggestion made in the report that

MFA could consider reallocating a share of the resources currently allocated through the Academy of Finland for development research. Finland also needs independent high-level development research, which is already under-resourced and restricted by thematic allocation. This research should be evaluated and funded strictly on academic criteria, and it should be kept apart from research capacity building funding.

In terms of the size of the projects, UniPID agrees that bigger projects with more resources can have more high quality development impact. Enlarging the size of the project makes sense when the two programmes are merged, and joint research and scholarships for local academics are included in the activities, but this should also be reflected in lengthening the duration of the projects. The project cycles should be significantly longer to allow for comprehensive, long-lasting and sustainable development impact. The length of the project cycle is also related to the monitoring and evaluation of the projects. We strongly agree that an appropriate evaluation framework and monitoring plan should be created for each project. However, it should then be taken into account that proper evaluation of the impact requires longer project duration, and in capacity building activities, the real impact can many times be seen only years after the project has ended.

For better impact and to exploit synergies, increase complementarity and avoid overlapping, joint coordination between the different projects partnering with same HEIs and countries should be strengthened and encouraged. Bigger projects should thus allow creation of project consortiums between various projects, which would significantly ease the heavy administrative burden for the partner institutions caused by various separate projects in the same institutions. Joint coordination would also better guarantee that the development impacts achieved in the different faculties would spread through the whole institution rather than stay with a reduced group of project participants. This can be better enhanced by also including the HEI central administration in the project planning. The joint coordination and the formation of the consortiums could be facilitated for instance by modifying the project selection process to two phases, where proposals for projects taking place in the same partner HEI could be recommended to submit a joint proposal in the second phase.

We agree with the idea to increase the support offered by the Finnish embassies to facilitate sufficient scanning of the local context and environment for higher education as well as the joint coordination of the different projects. It would be extremely useful to bring together the coordinators from Finland and elsewhere, of all the projects implemented in cooperation with the same institution to facilitate joint coordination. However, if the role of the embassies will be strengthened here, there must be sufficient resources in the embassies, in terms of knowledgeable personnel and time, to offer high quality services for the project coordinators. Additionally, strengthening the advisory role of the embassies then requires clarification of the division of work and the roles of the MFA and CIMO in the programme management and administration.

UniPID disagrees with the recommendation to reduce the number of partner countries to achieve higher impact. Even though we understand the intention to focus on the countries that are in most need of the cooperation, the selection should be based more on the partner institution and their needs than on the country. The selection should also be based on strategic consideration and justification of the different partners, since more impact can often be achieved if a project for instance includes partner institutions from two partner countries with different level of capacities, where south-south best practices can significantly enhance the impact. For the same reasons, we do not agree with the recommendation to concentrate only on younger universities outside of the capitals. Younger and older universities have different, but equally valid capacity development needs and objectives, and

particularly involving universities at different stages in the same project can be very productive. For better and long-lasting impact we however do suggest that instead of reducing the selection of countries, some priority could be given for cooperation with institutions with which Finnish HEIs have already had successful cooperation.

Regarding the stronger strategic guidance of the projects, we understand the need from the point of view of more efficient development policy, but it may also create limitations for academic freedom. We agree that the new programme could be better aligned with the upper level Finnish development policy objectives and priority themes, but under these objectives the academic cooperation should be given more freedom to implement the activities according to the specific expertise of the partners. The current programme has less upper-level strategic guidance and too much micro-management of the implementation and administration, which has in many cases created a heavy administrative burden for the coordinators. Partly related to this, and to also reduce the administrative load and inflexibility, we also agree with the recommendation to create an appropriate supervision mechanism to identify implementation issues as they arise and facilitate addressing them during the project. However, if the strategic/policy guidance would be increased, it must be emphasized that in addition to long-lasting projects, long-standing policies are also required to guarantee higher impact and sustainability of Finnish development cooperation, which should not be affected by shorter term political changes in the national government.

Considering the recommendation for the MFA to decide whether the main purpose of these programmes is to support the internationalization of Finnish HEIs or to assist the capacity building of the partner institutions, we agree that these objectives are not mutually exclusive. However, from our point of view, ODA funds should be used through these instruments to advance the development objectives in the partner countries and institutions. The internationalization goals of the HEIs and particularly the objectives related to the HEIs' global responsibility will be advanced through these cooperation activities in any case without giving them a priority. However, it would be useful if the Ministry of Education and Culture and MFA would align their strategies to guarantee mutual support for the common objectives and offer incentives for the universities to strengthen their global responsibility.

Finally, we would like to thank the MFA for giving the UniPID network the opportunity to review and comment on the draft report. We would be willing to also participate in the process of drafting the new programme or programmes.

---

*UniPID is a network of Finnish universities aiming at strengthening universities' global responsibility. UniPID advances and strengthens the interdisciplinary education, research and universities' societal impact related to global development issues. UniPID member universities: Aalto university, Tampere Technical University, University of Eastern Finland, University of Helsinki, University of Jyväskylä, University of Lapland, University of Oulu, University of Tampere, University of Turku, and Åbo Akademi. More information: [www.unipid.fi](http://www.unipid.fi)*