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Academic Impact Initiative: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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When Secretary-General Ban publicly announced the Academic Impact initiative a year ago, he spoke of the United Nations “continuing to open our doors to new partners. The academic community is surely at the top of that list.” He saw in the Impact the “hope to build stronger ties with institutions of higher learning...to benefit from your ideas and scholarship.”

Notable in this assertion— in addition to its time and venue, the convocation ceremony of Fairleigh Dickinson University—was the reference to “new” partnerships. To place it in context, it would be helpful to refer to the definition of the “Third UN” offered by Richard Jolly, Louis Emerij and Tom Weiss most recently in their extraordinary capstone volume of the UN Intellectual History Project, as “comprising NGOs, academics, consultants, experts, independent commissions, and other groups of individuals who routinely engage with the First UN (Member States) and the Second UN (UN staff) and thereby influence UN thinking, policies, priorities, and actions.”

Here, I would suggest, the key word is “routinely;” the considerable academic contribution to the UN since 1945 has been in immediate disciplines whose spontaneity has made their engagement with the Organization and system a matter of ready routine. What the Academic Impact seeks to do is build upon this robust base and encourage the investment of scholarship and research in areas that can have a durable, if not immediately self-evident, UN dimension.

In his John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture last year, Roger A. Coate mentioned the “complex interdependent and holistic organic world in which the UN operates;” by extension, response and support to the UN must itself be holistic and interdependent, allowing the wisdom of very precise specialisations to contribute to the easing of that complexity. Science, not diplomacy or politics, is the principal source of clarity and conviction on climate change, for instance. And science too will be the principal source for its solutions, although the choice to effect them will necessarily be diplomatic and political.

Areas of academic scrutiny and investigation such as this suggest the viability of a fourth UN, where this independent scholarship can lead to an engagement between the institution, the Organization and, ultimately, to global and national society. The “Third UN” offers excellent contributions specifically designed for a United Nations purpose; the “Academic Impact” seeks to effect change and raise the individual voice to a collective position of inquiry, exploration and creative solutions based on research that does not suggest such specificity. Its framework allows institutions to work with the UN and with each other to aggregate a still greater impact in supporting universally accepted principles, including those in the areas of human rights, literacy, sustainability and conflict resolution. Details about the Impact are available at

www.academicimpact.org. There is no cost associated with affiliation; the only expectation from participants is an activity each year that supports one or more of these principles.

For the United Nations Department of Public Information, the Impact is a logical reflection of its “convening” role in bringing together thoughts and ideas that promote informed awareness and debate about what the United Nations does and, as important, what it can do. As its head, Under Secretary-General Kiyoo Akasaka observed, “it is a particular mission of my department at the United Nations to be a forum where the scholarship and enquiry that is so integral to science can be expressed and shared, and, ultimately, lend itself to practical programmes of action.”

Some thirty international networks of universities and other institutes of higher education and research have endorsed the Impact and encouraged their members to join. More than two hundred individual institutions have done so, representing a global diversity of regions and a thematic wealth of disciplines. A number of these already have courses in, or undertake research on, the United Nations system. Such studies are usually located in schools or centres dealing with international affairs, political science or history. Others are institutions whose programmes may not immediately suggest a United Nations link but whose work and experience have a direct relevance on what we, as an Organization and system, are trying to do. Schools of medicine, for instance, can have bearing on our work in health-care; those in architecture can yield innovative models for swift, economical housing in the wake of natural disasters. Research on conservation in a faculty of arts can offer the means to preserve the creative work of indigenous communities. A campus that is able to efficiently and economically move to non-conventional energy sources for its power needs can offer a replicable model. An institution that grants credits for student involvement in specific developmental or inter-cultural activities offers a similar example.

These are illustrative instances of how every subject and discipline can have a UN imprint. What we are trying to do is to get relevant institutions to recognise this link and, often without additional effort or expense, undertake activities that can directly support United Nations mandates and objectives. For our part, we would transmit details of such activities, including studies or projects undertaken, to the nodal department or office best placed to act upon them. Such action could include inputs into policy formulation or the sharing of the specific experience with other institutions and, indeed, with Member States.

Important also will be the realisation by faculty and students that the very specific areas of their campus and academic activity can have global relevance and resonance through the United Nations. What is needed, to use the phrase of Michael J. Adams, President-elect of the International Association of University Presidents, in a work co-authored with Angelo Cartagna, “is not a form of citizenship that replaces the bond with the nation, but an added dimension of citizenship that reaches out to others beyond the nation.” (“Coming of Age in a Globalised World”). In the vein of that thought, what the Academic Impact seeks to do is not to replace, but to enhance, the bond that the scholar has with her discipline or institution. In so doing it aspires to build upon the critical studies of the United Nations (which ACUNS and its membership have so notably pioneered) to critical studies for the United Nations and the children, women and men who animate its purpose.

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