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UNITED NATIONS

ISSUES *IN BRIEF*

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT

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Development starts at home: making universities more relevant

Universities are key institutions for building capacity worldwide. Most renowned and prestigious universities are concentrated in North America and Europe and, traditionally, that is where many of the world's intellectual elite are educated. Unfortunately, that is also where a great number of young graduates from developing countries later elect to stay, depriving their home countries of invaluable knowledge and expertise.

If developing countries are to produce sufficient qualified policy-makers and researchers capable of tackling development challenges, it is essential that they find ways of putting an end to this brain drain.

One solution is for them to strengthen their own university capacities in terms of training skills, research capacity and teaching materials. This is particularly true in the case of subjects that have a major economic and political influence on the knowledge and skills of future entrepreneurs, managers and policy-makers – subjects such as economics, law and international relations, where graduates and researchers go on to advise or work with the government and formulate policies in key areas such as trade and investment.

But how exactly can developing countries build their own capacity? After years of under-funding and increased competition, some urgent issues have to be dealt with:

- How can individual academics, departments and institutions design up-to-date and relevant curricula that respond to the needs of their societies?
- How can they ensure that research by local universities has an impact on their governments' policy choices?
- How can they develop the capacity to formulate their own agenda and acquire their own expertise?

One project that seeks to address these questions is the UNCTAD Virtual Institute on Trade and Development.

For more information please turn over...

UNCTAD

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The UNCTAD Virtual Institute on Trade and Development

Launched in 2004 at UNCTAD's 11th ministerial conference, the Virtual Institute on Trade and Development is a network of universities teaching and researching trade issues.

Why a Virtual Institute?

The aim of the Institute is to help developing countries strengthen their teaching and research capacities in UNCTAD's areas of competence – international trade, investment and development issues.

How it is set up

The Virtual Institute network (<http://vi.unctad.org>) encourages cooperation and exchange of information among member universities, as well as with UNCTAD. It supports member universities by:

- Sharing research, teaching materials and tools, some of which are specifically designed for the Virtual Institute;
- Using the network to publish their research on key trade and development issues;
- Providing professional development opportunities for university staff;
- Encouraging dialogue between trade policy makers and academia.

UNCTAD's role

UNCTAD works with member universities on an individual basis, addressing the specific needs of each. It coordinates the network, maintains the website and occasionally develops teaching materials. In addition, members have access to UNCTAD publications and research, and to discussion forums on the Virtual Institute website.

From 12 members in 2005, the Virtual Institute is expected to increase its membership to around 20 universities by 2007.

How to become a member

There are two types of membership:

- Full university membership: open to universities involved in post-graduate education and research on trade and development, with a particular focus on policy;
- Associate membership: open to individuals interested in UNCTAD issues. Associate members can access public documents and contribute to discussions and debates.

Applications can be downloaded from the Virtual Institute webpage: (<http://vi.unctad.org>)