Terms of Reference

Evaluation of UNITAR's Learning-related Event Certifications

Background

1. The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) is a principal training body of the United Nations (UN) aiming to enhance the effectiveness of the UN in achieving its main objectives through training and research. UNITAR's mission is to develop the individual, institutional and organizational capacities of UN Member States and other stakeholders through high-quality learning solutions to improve decision-making and support actions at the national level to overcome contemporary global challenges. UNITAR has been developing individual capacities through various types of training, education and professional development offers under the Institute's various programme pillars.[1]

2. Over the years, UNITAR's outreach to learners has increased significantly, due in part to the growth in the delivery of e-Learning courses (e.g., massive open online courses (MOOCs) or similar events) and joint master degree or other non-degree diploma programmes organized by Programme Units. Outreach to learners is one of UNITAR's key performance indicators. Table 1 below illustrates the increasing number of UNITAR learners along with the corresponding certification rates by year and biennium.

Table 1: UNITAR learners and certification rates from 2016 to 2022 (annual)

Year	Total # beneficiary outreach	# of learners	# of learners with objective assessment	# of certificates of completion	Certification of completion rate	Bienniu
2016	54,840	35,093	19,113*	6,915*	36.18%	
2017	56,210	38,090	19,927*	11,726	58.84%	42%
2018	84,901	60,901	43,054*	15,580	36.19%	
2019	133,421	92,378	:bc	38,266	tbc	tbc
2020	322,410	209,881	196,449	45,812	23.32%	
2021	370,139	243,790	216,443	48,201	22.27%	23%
2022	395,987	277,976	249,235	62,578	25.11%	

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[1] Training provides individuals with a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes and/or values. For the most part, training is aimed at an individual's current job or function, but it may also be designed to empower a person to take a more active role, such as becoming a trainer, negotiating a treaty, chairing a major United Nations conference or participating in community-based peacebuilding activities. Education is intended for a future job, usually the next job. Professional development is similar to education, but its focus is more long-term, that is, with a view to a longer-term professional career (unlike the current one). It may involve earning a vocational degree, a professional degree, certification or credential, different jobs, or special assignments.

Notes: *Data retrieved from the Events Management System (EMS) on 25 July 2023. From 2016 to 2018, no distinction was made between CC:Learn and other UNITAR events in the EMS. In 2019, CC:Learn events were added manually and rates need to be calculated.

3. In addition to monitoring and reporting the number of learners, UNITAR also monitors and records information related to learner completion and certification, with the following types of recognitions awarded: certificates of participation, certificates of completion, executive diplomas and trainer certification. Certificates of participation and completion are recorded in the EMS. Certificates of completion are awarded to learners having successfully met the requirements of learning-related events with objective assessments of knowledge,[2] with such events being a subset of all learning-related events.[3]

4. While UNITAR's outreach to learners has increased, both in overall terms and for learning events with an objective assessment of knowledge, the number of certificates of completion has remained low, with certificate of completion rates declining in 2020-2021 by more than 20 percentage points from 2016-2017 levels. This is in contrast to the application of knowledge and skills, which has remained consistently high, with rates ranging between 78 and 82 per cent.[4]

5. In 2023, in conjunction with its review of Programme Performance Reports, the United Nations Board of Auditors observed the trend of decreasing completion rates for UNITAR learning events with objective assessments of learning. This decline in certification rates, from 42 per cent for the 2016-2017 biennium to 23 per cent for the 2020-2021 biennium coincides with a significant increase in learner outreach and other factors, such as the increase in use of the online delivery modality, triggered in part with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. In 2022, the average certificate of completion rate was 25 per cent, with significant variation across programme units (ranging from 0 to 85 per cent). Is there a correlation between the decline in certification rates and the increase in the number of learners (and/or other factors)? Given UNITAR's mission to deliver high-quality learning solutions, it is important to understand and address the underlying reasons for the low certification of completion rates.

Purpose

6. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of UNITAR's learning-related programming, with a focus on the drivers and barriers of successful learner completion and certification. In particular, the evaluation will seek to:
    a. identify factors for the declining/low level of certificate of completion rates for events with objective assessments of learning;
    b. explain reasons for the wide variation in completion rates across programme units;
    c. determine if there is a correlation between certification rates and other event and participant variables, such as delivery modality (i.e., in-person, online or blended), type of funding (i.e., fee-based or donor-funded), target audience characteristics (i.e., open for registration or restricted registration/application), event duration, thematic area, event type (e.g., master, professional diploma, MOOC), job relevance, importance for job success, overall usefulness and extent to which knowledge and skills have been applied, participant

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[2] Definitions of certificates of completion and certificates of participation and other types of certificates can be found in UNITAR's certification policy which was revised last in 2021.

[3] Certification of learning events counting towards the award of an Executive Diploma, Training of Trainers certification or Master's level degree shall also be recorded in the EMS.
[4] As measured in annual surveys to randomly sampled learners.

profile (gender, nationality and country status, affiliation, and age and disability shall data allow it);

d. Identify unintended outcomes from learning-related programmes with objective assessment of knowledge, particularly for learners not completing course requirements (if any);

e. formulate recommendations with a view to increasing certification of completion rates in the future to enable UNITAR to deliver on its mission more effectively; and

f. formulate good practices and lessons learned.

Scope

7. The scope of the evaluation includes UNITAR learning-related events with objective assessment of learning, covering all programme units and the CIFAL Global Network between 2016 and 2022.[5] The evaluation will also include a benchmarking exercise to assess UNITAR certification of completion rates against those in the learning industry. The scope of the evaluation will draw on findings and results from the ongoing evaluation on master's degrees and other post graduate diploma programmes.

Principal questions

Motivation v. demotivation
a. *Why have learners enrolled in UNITAR learning events with objective assessments of knowledge not completed the requirements?*

b. *What incentive structures are in place to motivate learners to complete events (e.g., supervisor requirement, perception on the value of the certificate, linkage of learning objectives to performance level objectives)? What strategies can be implemented to better support learners in successfully completing their courses (e.g., follow-up after event through reminders, targeted emails and newsletters, other learning reinforcement, email informing about registration deletion, and other AI-facilitated techniques)? What are good practices from programme units? How can UNITAR leverage positive outcomes and replicate successful models in its future learning initiatives? What reasons have learners for only partially completing events (i.e. learning needs fulfilled after partial completion, no requirement for a certificate as learning needs have been irrelevant for job/career, etc.)?*

Factors affecting performance
c. *What are the factors influencing certificate of completion rates, including variables such as type of funding, delivery modality (e.g., in-person v. online, synchronous v. asynchronous), registration modality, degree of alignment to job performance, event duration, event type, thematic area, overall usefulness and learner motivation, particularly during the COVID-19 period?*
d. *What reasons explain the wide variation observed in completion rates across programme units?*
e. *To what extent do gender or other characteristics of the learner play a role in course completion?*
f. *To what extent have other participant profile related variables (nationality and country status, affiliation and age and disability if the data allows) influenced the certification of completion rate?*
g. *To what extent are there differences in completion rates, combined with application of knowledge and skills, for master's degree type events, MOOCs, and other learning events?*

Accurate recording of certificates of completion
h. *Is there under or over reporting of certificates of completion on the EMS, what are current recording procedures and how may these be affecting completion rates figures, e.g., registrations recorded*

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[5] 2019 data, as partly recorded offline, may be incomplete for some variables.

as participations and irregularities in reporting events as non-learning events or as not having objective assessments of learning and vice versa (though the case)?

Industry Standards

    i. What are the standards in the learning industry, including within and outside organizations in the United Nations providing learning-related programming, in conjunction with certification of completion and related targets? How have industry standards been evolving and what reasons do they suggest for different completion rates by event type (i.e. pick and choose content of MOOCs)?

(Unintended) Outcomes

    a. Have learners who have not completed requirements applied knowledge and skills, and if so, is application attributable to the UNITAR event? For 2022, to what extent has application of knowledge and skills from those who have not completed requirements contributed to implementing the SDGs?

    b. What are any unintended outcomes, if any, for learners who have not completed the requirements?

Human rights, gender equality and women empowerment (GEEW) and social inclusion

8. The evaluation will incorporate human rights, gender, disability and equity perspectives in the evaluation process and findings, particularly by involving women and other disadvantaged groups subject to discrimination. All key data collected shall be disaggregated by sex, age grouping, disability and country status and be included in the evaluation report.

Data collection

9. Data collection will include the following:

   - Desk review, including narrative reports (sampled), event announcements/course syllabi, EMS and Moodle data (based on a purposeful sample on lowest and highest certification rates), annual level 3 survey data, previous evaluation reports, industry reports and studies on completion rates from learning, Results Reports, Programme Performance Reports, etc.
   - Survey deployed to learners from 2022 and 2023 (January-June), including participants who did not complete the training or meet certificate of completion requirements.
   - Interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) with key stakeholders, including participants, project coordinators at UNITAR, and instructors, and other learning industry representatives (ROI Institute, ATD, ITC-ILO, UNSSC, etc.) to gather qualitative feedback on potential factors influencing certification rates.

Analytical approach and methodology

10. The evaluation will involve exploratory descriptive analysis, using primary and secondary data available. The secondary data may be culled from UNITAR corporate reports, the EMS, Moodle platform, Level 3 survey data, lessons learned database and findings from similar studies (including those identified by ChatGPT/Board and validated by the evaluation team).

11. The evaluation is to be undertaken in accordance with the UNITAR Evaluation Policy, the operational guidelines for independent evaluations and the United Nations norms and standards for evaluation, and the UNEG Ethical Guidelines.

Deliverables

12. The evaluation will provide the institute with the following outputs:
   - A report presenting the findings, recommendations, good practices and lessons learned
   - An infographic.

- A presentation of the report to UNITAR Programme Management.

Indicative time frame

13. The evaluation is expected to be completed within a three to four-month period, as provided in the below indicative timeframe.

Activity	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Wk 6	Wk 7	Wk 8	Wk 9	Wk 10	Wk 11	Wk 12	Wk13	Wk14	Wk15	Wk16
	October 2023				November 2023				December 2023				January 2024			
Initial scoping	▮	▮	▮													
Data collection & analysis				▮	▮	▮	▮									
Presentation of evaluation scope and emerging findings to EAB at October EAB meeting						▮	▮	▮								
Draft report and comments								▮	▮							
Report finalisation									▮	▮	▮					
Final report											▮	▮				
Presentation of findings to UNITAR Management													▮			
Presentation of findings in the next EAB meeting (date tbc)													▮			

Evaluation management

14. The evaluation will be conducted and managed by the Planning, Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Unit.

15. The Manager of the Unit reports directly to the Executive Director of UNITAR and is independent from all programme units. According to the UNITAR Evaluation Policy, in due consultation with the Executive Director/programme management, PPME issues and discloses final evaluation reports without prior clearance from other UNITAR Management or functions. This builds the foundations of UNITAR's evaluation function's independence and ability to better support learning and accountability.

Communication/dissemination of results

16. The final report will be shared with all stakeholders and will be posted on UNITAR's online, public repository of evaluation reports.

Evaluator ethics

17. Those conducting and managing the evaluation ("evaluators/evaluation managers") should not have participated in the design or implementation of learning-related programming or have a conflict of interest with the evaluand. Evaluators/evaluation mangers shall sign and return a copy of the code of conduct under Annex F prior to initiating the assignment and comply with UNEG Ethical Guidelines.