



UNITED NATIONS  
UNIVERSITY

**UNU-MERIT**



**Maastricht University**



**2021** **UNU-MERIT**  
STRATEGIC PLAN  
» **2025**

**UNU-MERIT**

Strategic Plan | 2021 – 2025

# Table of Contents

Foreword	3
1   Profile	4
2   Structure	8
3   Positioning	12
4   Research	16
5   Education	20
6   Impact	24
7   Outreach	28
8   Well-being	32

# FOREWORD



I am proud to present to you this strategic plan for UNU-MERIT, which outlines our ambitions and plans for the next four years in our key areas of research, education, impact, outreach, as well as in terms of personal well-being and community development. Driven by the ambition to be a leading actor in the global effort to achieve the UN 2030 Agenda, this strategic plan presents our new positioning on comprehensive innovation. Embedded in a new organisational structure and carried forward by a committed team of support staff, we will leverage our world-leading expertise in the economics of innovation & technology and in governance & public policy to unlock the full potential of social, economic and technological innovation. We will support these ambitions with strategic new investments in academic and UN staff positions and critical new support roles.

A plan is only strategic when it truly guides us towards our shared vision. Therefore, this plan presents an evidence-based narrative offering concrete actions for the institute to take. This plan responds to three important and urgent trends: we address pressing global challenges such as the

enormous threat of climate change to human survival and the devastating effects of COVID-19 on global inequality; we embrace ‘team science’ as a way to address these increasingly complex problems that require multidisciplinary solutions; and we develop new computational expertise, tapping into the emerging multidisciplinary area of computational social science.

Crucially, this plan has been shaped and refined over an entire academic year by people from across UNU-MERIT: our academic and support staff, but also Master’s students, PhD candidates, professorial fellows, our international advisory board, and external partners. From September 2020 until June 2021, dozens of people have joined working groups, task forces, workshops and other strategy meetings. We have met, discussed, brainstormed, analysed, hypothesised and shared our hopes and dreams that gradually informed this strategy, together, piece-by-piece, month-after-month. We have openly talked about what we wanted to change, and built a vision for our common future together. This report is a reflection of all these discussions, all our inspiration and aspirations, and all our efforts to make UNU-MERIT the place we want it to be.

I am immensely grateful to everyone who has put their trust in this immense effort, after we jointly embarked on this strategy development process in September 2020. It gives me the confidence to present to you this strategic plan – so I am now looking forward to implementing it together over the next few years, and to seeing UNU-MERIT excel and flourish.

**Prof. Dr. Bartel Van de Walle,**  
**Director of UNU-MERIT**

The United Nations University – Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT) is a research and training institute of United Nations University, which collaborates closely with Maastricht University (UM) in the south of the Netherlands.

# 1 | Profile

**UNU-MERIT envisions a world where the social, economic and technological nature of innovation is not only well understood but also well governed; a world where societies champion well-being and sustainable development for all, while using innovation as the key to change. The mission of UNU-MERIT is therefore to advance societal policy and innovation research, to provide education and to mobilise knowledge in order to unlock the full potential of innovation for achieving inclusive sustainable development. Against this backdrop, UNU-MERIT firmly subscribes to the mission of UNU to help tackle the pressing global problems of human survival, development and welfare that are the concern of the United Nations, its Peoples and Member States.**

The vision and mission of UNU-MERIT set the stage for our institutional focus and profile. Our activities in research, education and knowledge mobilisation focus on the crucial role of innovation for achieving inclusive sustainable development. We accept, however, that innovation is not always a positive force. Innovations may lead to uneven economic participation and unequal distribution of its benefits, leaving those behind who lack access to education, knowledge or financial resources. Unequal levels of development create additional challenges, such as a growing lack of social protection, spurring unequal wealth accumulation, or a deepening digital divide. Unequal global levels of human and economic development may also cause human migration, potentially depleting the innovation potential of regions from where talent leaves.

To fully address the intricate and interwoven social, economic and technological aspects of innovation a



comprehensive approach is needed, as any single perspective can only provide for incomplete findings and inadequate policy recommendations. The pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of innovation is the new focus of UNU-MERIT, and will be reflected in the UNU-MERIT profile through its new positioning: Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development (CI4SD).

## Achieving ambitions

Our ambition therefore is to push the boundaries of research, education and knowledge mobilisation for understanding and governing comprehensive innovation. Many factors in the complex realm of social-economic-technological innovation and their effects on human and economic development remain unexplored and unknown. We will further investigate these factors to design, develop, test and implement novel approaches that contribute to our understanding and governance of comprehensive innovation. These investigations will not only draw from the expertise present in our institute in the areas of economics, policy and governance, but will open up new avenues towards novel computational and data analytics research. UNU-MERIT's ambition therefore is to generate new knowledge on the intricate nature and role of innovation in complex social-economic-technological settings, to translate this knowledge into new methods, tools, policies and governance structures, and to educate and train students, researchers and policymakers to assimilate, apply and implement these new insights.

To maintain and develop our global leadership role in advancing research, we will engage in outstanding transdisciplinary research, collaboration with leading



researchers and research institutions worldwide, with a focus on deepening our engagement with the Global South. Through our globally renowned PhD programme, we will continue to foster new generations of researchers and academic leaders through inter-disciplinary academic education and training.

Sustaining and developing our internationally recognised contribution to education and training will be accomplished by further developing the UNU-UM Master's programme in Public Policy & Human Development. We will do this by embracing our comprehensive innovation approach, expanding our established training programmes and developing new opportunities that target talent across the Global South.

In order to nurture and develop our internationally recognised role in translating science into policy and practice, we will interact with strategically selected practitioners and policymakers from local to global levels. We will position UNU-MERIT as an international hub for science, practice and policy dialogues, anchored in the academic and social environment of the city of Maastricht, the 'Euregio' region straddling the Belgian, Dutch and German borders. Communication and outreach is henceforth a central part of UNU-MERIT's work in connecting science to policy and practice.

To push the boundaries of research, education and knowledge mobilisation for understanding and governing comprehensive innovation requires us to work differently. While specific expertise and

knowledge in each of the social-economic-technology domains is essential and will continue to be nurtured within UNU-MERIT, more is needed to achieve our ambitions. Therefore, we will increasingly work as teams combining expertise and knowledge from the fields in which we already excel with expertise and knowledge from novel domains such as computational social science and data analytics.

Lastly, an efficient and supportive administration, and an inclusive, transparent, trusted and safe internal working environment that facilitates academic freedom, sparks creativity and stimulates our individual and collective best efforts are prerequisites for making the mission and vision of UNU-MERIT a reality.

As such, UNU-MERIT fully aligns with Maastricht University's ambition to be an inclusive, innovative and sustainable institution as highlighted in its Sustainable UM 2030 Plan.

Via the Hub, we aim to be an active partner on innovation processes and projects, setting out new scientific insights and bringing our training to policymakers.

## 2 | Structure

The first phase of the strategy development process indicated a clear need to redesign the present structure of UNU-MERIT. The main justification for this proposed revision was the complicated structure of the institute, which was no longer seen as amenable to lasting cooperation, common success, visibility or even well-being. To address these failings, we aim to provide a unified environment for all UNU-MERIT staff members to conduct research and provide education and training, while aligning and reinforcing administrative support towards the ambitions of the institute in outreach, impact and partnerships. In short, to future-proof the structure of the institute.

As a first crucial step, we will distinguish activities at the overall UNU-MERIT level, and activities at the interface of UNU-MERIT and Maastricht University (UM). At UNU-MERIT level, we define activities in terms of programmes; at UNU-MERIT/UM level, we will bring all activities together in a new institute.

At UNU-MERIT level, we will now have two foundational programmes: i) on Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development (CI4SD), and ii) on Outreach & Engagement. The CI4SD programme will cover all new activities that we aim to conduct under the new positioning of UNU-MERIT (see next chapter). The Outreach & Engagement programme will gather all activities on local and global events, workshops, round tables, seminars, policy labs and joint policy development. The latter programme will be known as the 'UNU-MERIT Hub' – a physical space where staff will interact with students, young people, entrepreneurs, policymakers, companies, NGOs and communities to work together on achieving the SDGs, both locally and globally.



Via the Hub, we aim to be an active partner on innovation processes and projects, setting out new scientific insights and bringing our training to policymakers.

Where UNU-MERIT interfaces with UM, the Maastricht Graduate School of Governance (MGSoG) and the MERIT Institute will merge into a single new organisational research entity: the **Institute for Societal Policy & Innovation Research (INSPIRE)**, which will be a research institute of UM's School of Business and Economics (SBE). INSPIRE will take over all responsibilities, duties and privileges that are currently associated with MERIT in the legal cooperation agreement between UM and UNU, and associated with MGSoG in the extended application agreement. Within the INSPIRE Institute, there will be two main components: the Research Units, and the UNU-MERIT Graduate School.

### Interfacing for impact

At UNU-MERIT, our goal is to be recognised for seminal transdisciplinary team-based research on CI4SD based on our excellent disciplinary expertise. We will strongly encourage research contributions to the CI4SD themes – including on climate change, the digital transformation, poverty and inequality, and the future of work. At the same time, we want to strengthen the UNU-MERIT 'domain' research base by enabling research staff to deepen and expand their domain knowledge. This will take place in three research units: Economics of Innovation, Public Policy & Governance of Innovation, and Computational Innovation. Each research unit will be led by a Head of Unit, responsible for the budget of the research unit, career development of all unit staff, and ensuring



the unit’s contributions to the UNU-MERIT programmes, as well as its contributions to the professional education and training programmes.

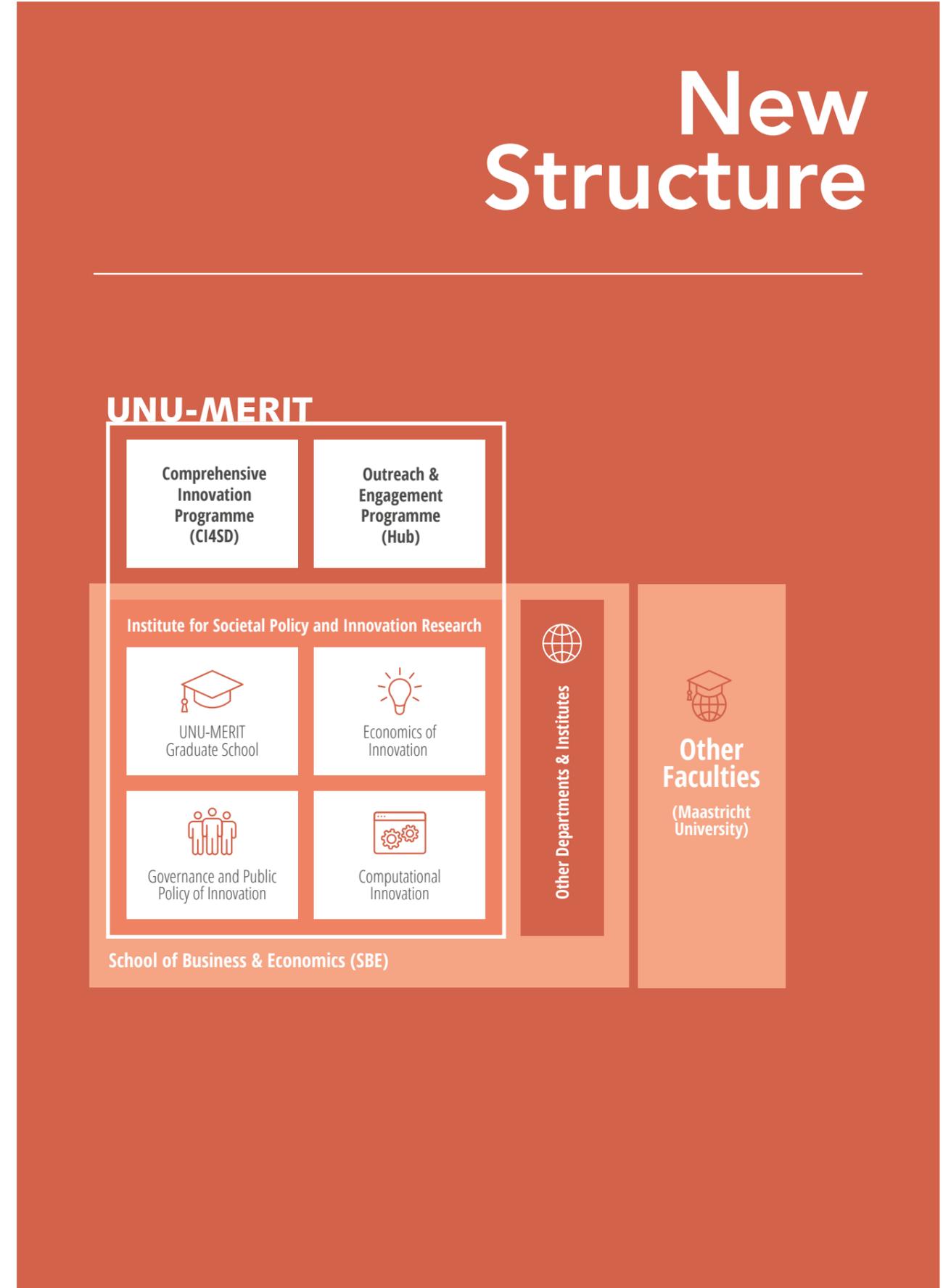
Research activities within UNU-MERIT are currently split into eight research themes that broadly cover our research interests. These and possibly other emerging themes can continue as bottom-up collaborative initiatives among researchers, independent from the organisational structure of the research units, or they can be reconstituted with other emerging themes.

The new UNU-MERIT Graduate School will be responsible for the quality of the educational, training and PhD research programmes offered within UNU-MERIT, and will manage the student lifecycle from marketing, recruitment, admissions, registration, all the way through awarding degrees, scoping internships and alumni networking. The UNU-MERIT Graduate School will offer high-quality education and training to Master’s students, PhD candidates and professionals. Master’s and PhD training programmes include research methodology, research integrity, skills training and career development courses.

The UNU-MERIT Graduate School will be led by the Education Director, who will be responsible for the school’s budget, operations and management.

All UM academic and support staff in UNU-MERIT will be assigned to INSPIRE, and as such be fully integrated into SBE and UM on the basis of a single set of terms and conditions (which will vary, depending on the specific position). These terms and conditions will be clearly communicated to current staff, as well as to any new hires. We will align the MGSoG and MERIT administration and support services by integrating separate or parallel administrative structures and processes, with the goal of achieving greater administrative efficiency and effectiveness within the INSPIRE institute.

The following figure shows the full new structure of UNU-MERIT, including its linkages with SBE. As a result, UNU-MERIT will strengthen its connection and collaboration with other institutes and departments within SBE and UM, potentially bringing other relevant disciplinary perspectives to contribute to our understanding of CI4SD.



“Without innovation, we cannot meet the challenges of our time... We need to share ideas, push boundaries and move faster. And we must harness the opportunities brought by digital technologies.”

*UN Secretary-General António Guterres*



## 3 | Positioning

**As a major UNU institute, we are fully committed to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, at the heart of which are the well-known 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The SDGs define our collective global priorities, calling for action by governments, business and civil society to end poverty and ensure a life of dignity and opportunity for all – while also considering the finite resources of an increasingly fragile planet and the needs and rights of future generations.**

Yet, with less than a decade to go, concerns are growing over the slow and patchy progress made in pursuit of the SDGs. Worse still, these delays have been exacerbated by knock-on effects from the recent pandemic: increasing global inequality, stuttering economic growth, widening digital divides and weakening multilateralism. Moreover, the risks from climate change and extreme weather events,

which disproportionately impact the poorest and most vulnerable, are further threatening whatever achievements had already been made.

The UN is therefore calling for renewed global actions to accelerate progress in achieving the SDGs – and explicitly by leveraging innovation. UNU-MERIT is proud to join this call, to apply its world-class expertise in social, economic and technological innovation to a common global effort to restart progress on the SDGs. Through an ambitious and innovative research agenda, excellent education and training, and effective knowledge mobilisation, we plan to unlock the full potential of innovation to achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

We will develop an ambitious institutional agenda focused on innovation as a key driver for sustainable development from an integrated, comprehensive social-economic-technological perspective. Clearly, societal policy innovations can either drive or hinder technological innovation and accentuate or diminish the economic effects, both positive and negative, of technological innovation. Our ambition therefore is to clarify the complex interactions and feedback loops that intersperse the social, economic and technological dimensions of innovation in society – and to influence policies accordingly.

The pace of innovation and its ultimate impact on achieving the SDGs is highly dependent on the broader system in which innovation takes place. We will develop a novel, integrated and holistic approach to studying the drivers and impacts of social, economic and technological innovation. This approach will adopt a systemic perspective to identify and understand the complexity of innovation and its





# Actions



## INVEST

- in team-based partnerships to address challenges under the banner of Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development (CI4SD)
- in CI4SD teams to advance research and develop breakthrough ideas to address key global challenges
- in targeted and strategic partnerships to support collaboration and exchange with societal and policy stakeholders



## PROVIDE

- opportunities for cooperation and dialogue to create bridges between policymakers, citizens and academic communities
- opportunities to translate science into policy and practice, to increase societal impact and policy uptake of our research



## REINFORCE

- our positioning on CI4SD
- our research agenda by tackling pressing and emerging global challenges aimed at promoting inclusive sustainable development
- policy agendas aimed at achieving the 2030 Agenda and the post-2030 process
- collaboration internally and externally across different disciplines through strategic partnerships

impacts on achieving the SDGs. It will acknowledge the trade-offs that exist between the different goals of innovation, and identify the emergent phenomena that appear through the interactions between the micro, meso and macro levels.

In combining our existing expertise on the economics of innovation and technology, governance and public policy, along with tapping into new expertise in the field of computational innovation, our ambition is to make a decisive contribution to the 2030 agenda. We refer to this new positioning as **Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development (CI4SD)**.

### Launching the CI4SD agenda

During the period of this strategy, we will develop the CI4SD research agenda, and provide new opportunities for staff to collaborate internally while further developing partnerships and networks externally. We will seek crossovers with other disciplines, cooperation and dialogue with stakeholders, and build bridges between

policymakers, citizens and academic communities. Through these collaborations, we will trailblaze a new research agenda around the concept of CI4SD – an agenda that is multidisciplinary, academically rigorous, policy and societally relevant, and that has significant potential for impact.

To implement the CI4SD agenda, we will develop a set of team-based research projects, gathering different perspectives from across the institute to address various issues under the banner of CI4SD. These projects will be developed through an open and competitive process, creating opportunities for all to express their ideas and develop the approach and agenda to Comprehensive Innovation. At all stages of project development, we will organise extensive interactions with stakeholders at the local, national and global levels, sharing approaches and output broadly in academic and policy circles. Already in spring 2021, we launched a first call for comprehensive innovation teams, and we will continue to expand this team-based approach by introducing new opportunities to jointly fulfil our ambitious mission.

We will inspire and empower research leadership across the entire institute, encouraging bottom-up research agendas, providing a safe environment that allows for innovative, novel and radical ideas, while facilitating collaboration across the institute and with external partners.

## 4 | Research

**Our research focuses on pressing global challenges, including climate action, the digital transformation, poverty and inequality, and particularly their impact on human and economic sustainable development. Through our disciplinary and multidisciplinary research, our ambition is to contribute to the academic debate and to societal policy and innovation solutions at all stages of the policy process: from the setting of a policy agenda to the delivery and evaluation of public policy. In meeting these twin aims, we ensure that our research maintains the highest standards of academic and scientific excellence and rigour, while remaining policy relevant.**

To achieve this ambition, we will maintain and further strengthen our international research leadership in UNU-MERIT's core areas of expertise – in the economics of innovation and technology, and in governance and public policy – and continue to ensure a critical mass of research and staff in these disciplinary areas. In addition, we will actively seek out new synergies among those areas to develop,

demonstrate and validate a multidisciplinary, holistic and integrated approach to address the global challenges for sustainable development.

The capacity to analyse diverse data sets with powerful data-driven models and simulations can lead to important new insights into the intricate and interwoven social, economic and technological aspects of Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development (see chapter above, 'Positioning'). A new research line that we will develop within UNU-MERIT will focus on the design, development and use of new data, modelling and simulation methods and techniques for improving our understanding of comprehensive innovation – an area we refer to as computational innovation. Data visualisation, social network analysis, complexity modelling, and social simulation models such as system dynamics and agent-based modelling are some of the key approaches in this emerging research area. We will explore the potential of these approaches for our research agenda, and expand our expertise in those areas where we identify significant added value.



Our research across the different areas of expertise within the institute, our active pursuit of novel research synergies, and the creation of a computational foundation in the institute, puts UNU-MERIT in a unique position to achieve global leadership in a new and ambitious research agenda on social, economic and technological innovation.

**Bridging research to policy**

We view academic and societally relevant research as complementary, and as an institute we will continue to act as a bridge between research and policy. Academic research and publishing remain important activities, therefore, providing academic validity to the societally and policy relevant work being undertaken in the institute. We will also continue to pursue broader engagement and communication with diverse stakeholders, including through innovative communication means and channels. The development of the 'UNU-MERIT Hub' (see chapter below, 'Impact') will provide an important new means of generating stakeholder engagement and communicating our research findings.

We will inspire and empower research leadership across the entire institute, encouraging bottom-up research agendas, providing a safe environment that allows for innovative, novel and radical ideas, while facilitating collaboration across the institute and with external partners. Research leadership will be developed through bottom-up initiatives that allow us to build and develop our current and future disciplinary research and our Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development agenda. The institute will provide researchers with the time, space and opportunities needed for thought leadership, curiosity-driven research agendas and experimentation that provide for the development of novel research

lines within UNU-MERIT's comprehensive innovation ambitions. This development of academic leadership will be inclusive, with researchers at all levels of seniority encouraged to develop these skills for the further benefit of the institute's research agenda as well as for achieving personal ambitions and career goals. In these efforts, we will emphasise a collegial approach – via team-based working – in line with the broader strategic aim of further integrating the institute's diverse research areas.

To fund our research ambitions, we will continue to support a broad and diversified approach to financing. We will provide research facilitation support for individuals and research groups applying for grants through major national funding streams, including through the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), as well as through the Horizon Europe programme. We will continue to support researchers seeking out funding through contract research and consultancy activities with partners within the UN system and beyond, leveraging these efforts to develop long-term strategic partnerships. To achieve these aims we will develop and harness our research networks, leading ambitious efforts on joint research collaborations and projects. By developing partnerships with funding agencies, our ambition is to further secure additional structural funding to support existing research and to help develop new research lines. While remaining responsive to the priorities of external funders, we will also mobilise internal funding to provide seed and other funding to initiatives that fall under the banner of Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development or that promote novel and radical agendas with longer-term potential.

Through our collaboration with Maastricht University, we also have strong roots locally as well as nationally. We will strengthen the links with the School of Business and Economics, by exploring collaborative research opportunities with SBE faculty from all departments, including through joint staff appointments. We will also pursue research collaborations with other faculties and institutes, such as the Data Science Institute, in areas that can help strengthen or expand our research portfolio.

# Actions



**INVEST**

---

- in recruiting early-career and established researchers in the core areas of research of the institute, to reach or maintain a critical mass in the research units
- in recruiting UN staff (both P and PSA profiles) to support and strengthen the UNU-MERIT comprehensive innovation agenda and interact with the research units
- in seed funding for novel and promising, but also risky and uncertain, research proposals that strengthen our positioning on comprehensive innovation
- in securing structural donor funding for sustaining our overall research agenda



**PROVIDE**

---

- an open approach to staff recruitment that brings in leading or promising researchers, while encouraging and ensuring diversity among our research staff
- an environment conducive to academic freedom and create opportunities for researchers to develop and show research leadership within the broad areas of the institute
- incentives for the constant development of our research agenda through new initiatives
- institutional support for researchers engaging in funding proposals and contract research
- structural support for open access publications and making our data findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable (FAIR)



**REINFORCE**

---

- the research units to develop and implement disciplinary research in the core areas of the institute, providing a space for deepening and broadening existing research areas, and for approaching disciplinary research from different perspectives
- research leadership in its manifold forms through our rewards and recognition programme
- existing collaborations with research institutes and societal stakeholders, while identifying and developing new strategic research partners, particularly in the Global South
- showcasing our research and connecting researchers with policymakers and diverse stakeholders through the UNU-MERIT Hub

“Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development.”

*Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan*

## 5 | Education

### i. Formal Education

**UNU-MERIT aims to educate the next generation of research leaders and policymakers by providing them with the right knowledge and transferable skills to make a difference in the world and to help them tackle both current and future sustainability challenges. We want to attract talented students who are looking to be part of a vibrant community where learning is inspired by an ambitious research agenda and led by world-class teaching staff.**

Our ambition is to build on our tradition of educational excellence to create transformative outcomes for a diverse population of international students in public policy, innovation and societal impact. Our education and training programmes address global challenges, and utilise the classroom environment to come up with innovative solutions to those challenges. We will continue to leverage our rich network of policymakers, practitioners and experts from the fields of public policy, governance and innovation to work with students on concrete policy cases from the classroom environment. We further commit to inclusion and diversity through direct engagement with various global stakeholders, particularly in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals.

We will continue to use and create new, open and multidisciplinary learning spaces where students and researchers can collaborate in a dynamic, inspiring and inclusive atmosphere. Our teaching method revolves around creating environments where students take ownership of their own learning. We focus on the specific needs of the students, and we emphasise each student’s unique skills and abilities throughout their learning journey. Our teaching

method is based on ensuring a solid methodological foundation, where students and researchers are able to critically apply both quantitative and qualitative skills for evidence-based policy and research analysis.

We will enhance our provision of established instruction and innovative methods, adapted to different contexts. Core to our established instruction is problem-based learning, where students learn about a subject through the experience of solving an open-ended problem. That is then combined with project-based and action learning, where students gain knowledge and skills by engaging and working collaboratively for a period of time to investigate and debate real-life policy questions and complex case studies. We will also introduce or expand innovative approaches such as Learning Studios, where students acquire a deeper knowledge through active exploration of real-world challenges in controlled and pre-constructed lab settings, as well as game and simulation-based Policy Labs where students apply theory to practice, for example during public policy ‘simulation’ games where they present findings in a conference setting.

Based on the analysis of the MPP programme conducted in the first phase of the strategy process, we will develop the scenarios presented on the various specialisations and decide on the best course to take. We will look into the needs and feasibility of diversifying our Master’s programme, and explore opportunities for joint programmes with the School of Business and Education and other faculties of Maastricht University.

We will unite our two PhD programmes, the full-time 'IEGD' and the part-time 'GPAC2', into a single UNU-MERIT PhD programme, in which the full-time and part-time options continue to exist but fall under the same identity. We will establish a sound and sustainable financial basis for the programme, increase and diversify our supervision of PhD candidates, and continue to attract a majority of our PhD candidates from the Global South. We will explicitly align all calls for new candidates to the research activities of the institute, while synchronising the programme cycles of the full-time and part-time options to maximise interactions between the two groups. We will draft a 'Personal Development Plan' for each PhD candidate and their team of supervisors and promotor within six months of the start of each PhD journey, in which all parties agree to specific commitments on supervision time and effort, training needs and deliverables needed to successfully complete the PhD programme within four years. The training programme offered to PhD candidates will be revised, leading to a portfolio of courses available in-house or globally. Supervisors and promotor will be strongly encouraged to involve PhD candidates in their research agenda, for instance through joint and cost-sharing projects with UN agencies or other knowledge partners. We will also explore joint PhD degrees with other universities and institutes.



### ii. Capacity Development

Beyond the formal educational opportunities UNU-MERIT currently offers, we also have the ambition to train individuals and organisations to strengthen and maintain their capabilities in setting and achieving their own development objectives. This training is provided through our capacity development programmes, such as UNU-MERIT's DEIP programme, which are particularly relevant for participants from and in the Global South. By training policymakers and practitioners, we help influence and impact how they design and implement their policies on the ground. As such, our capacity development programmes accelerate our influence and impact in the process of promoting and implementing sustainable development. Capacity development programmes also benefit UNU-MERIT in at least three ways: first, they can be a source of sustainable funding; second, they serve as a source of knowledge and up-to-date information on developments locally and globally; and third, they support networking and broadening our contacts to bridge academia, the UN system and policymakers.

UNU-MERIT commits to establishing a strong capacity development arm within the institute. We want to be recognised as the leading institution for capacity development within the framework of Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development, and become known as a reputable training centre of the UN and the key player that UN agencies come to for training in our research areas. To realise these ambitions, we will establish a Capacity Development Office within UNU-MERIT headed by a full-time Capacity Development Manager responsible for overseeing relevant programmes across the institute and connecting with the research units.



# Actions



## INVEST

- in the new UNU-MERIT Graduate School to provide a solid and effective structure for all our formal education programmes and capacity development initiatives
- in new active learning experiences by enhancing the opportunities of interactions between policymakers, UN partners and students in the UNU-MERIT Hub through Learning Studios and Policy Labs
- in establishing a Capacity Development Office with a dedicated capacity development manager, overseeing all capacity programmes and connecting with the research units
- in providing a sustainable financial basis for the integrated and renewed PhD programme, including an increase in the PhD candidate stipend



## PROVIDE

- institutional support for establishing an alumni office
- institutional support and incentives for PhD candidates, supervisors and promotor in a renewed and integrated UNU-MERIT PhD programme
- personal development plans for all PhD candidates with clearly defined agreements with the supervisory team



## REINFORCE

- a multicultural and inclusive environment where students can grow personally and academically
- linkage and cross-fertilisation opportunities among education programmes, and among students and researchers
- our presence in the Global South in the process of promoting and implementing equal learning opportunities for all
- partnerships for delivering education through our alumni network and through collaboration with other research institutes and relevant societal stakeholders

We will take a leading role in developing fair research partnerships with the Global South as a means of sharing knowledge, building up capabilities and delivering the institute's contributions and solutions to the pressing problems faced by developing countries.

## 6 | Impact

**UNU-MERIT engages with society to inform our research and increase its impact, working with stakeholders on new approaches to global challenges. In so doing, we aim to make a demonstrable contribution to societies and economies by supporting individuals, organisations and countries – as well as our shared environment.**

Through our academic partnerships, we aim to explore complementary approaches and perspectives, while amplifying shared disciplinary perspectives and actively promoting knowledge exchange through education and capacity building programmes. In our partnerships with UN and other policymakers, we aim to work as equals in addressing global societal challenges, setting policy agendas, using our joint convening power for maximum policy impact. In parallel, by developing partnerships with funding agencies, we will jointly develop exciting and impactful research agendas on pressing global challenges. We strive therefore to translate our research into evidence-based policy recommendations, delivered to those who can drive positive change, while ensuring that policy also 'works' for the general public.

Our approach to strategic partnerships will remain rooted in the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG#17 – Partnerships for the Goals. Through strategic partnerships, we will work together with various actors on the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. In addition, through our growing convening power, we will foster collaboration between international policy actors and academia to co-create research and training opportunities to tackle the most pressing and complex challenges.

Rarely has the need for independent policy research been greater than in today's global political climate. As a knowledge partner in the UN system, with a long-standing and strong partnership with Maastricht University, UNU-MERIT is uniquely placed to address this need by providing actionable policy recommendations grounded in our academic research. We will further increase our collaboration with policy actors to ensure that our research is solidly embedded in policy. Simultaneously, this intensified cooperation means that policy becomes an integral component of our programmes, integrating policy considerations in the design and delivery of research and capacity development activities. Through investing in our research communication and capacity development, we aim to make our work more accessible to policymakers at various levels. Building on our ambition for a multidisciplinary and team-based approach to working internally, we further value external collaboration as a means of providing complementary insights, advancing knowledge and disseminating research findings, emphasising that our reach, impact and visibility will be far greater through collaboration than isolation.

Through the 'UNU-MERIT Hub', we will provide resources and infrastructure to support our staff and students to deliver effective societal and policy engagement. The Hub will serve as the institute's incubator for initiating and developing interactive collaboration with stakeholders involved in sustainable development challenges. We will use the Hub to develop and test novel approaches for conducting action research in new Learning Studios and Policy Labs. We will also develop new initiatives on community-based and citizen research in the Hub,

# Actions

in close collaboration with related initiatives at Maastricht University and the city of Maastricht. In leveraging our position as a neutral knowledge broker, we will continue to provide a platform for policymakers and academics to drive sustainable development through comprehensive innovation (see chapter above, 'Positioning'). We will therefore actively contribute to the global debate on the post-2030 development processes.

Activities in the Hub will simultaneously provide a platform for increasing our global engagement with a particular focus on the Global South through targeted and strategic collaborations, as well as building on current flagship initiatives such as SITE4Society. We will further explore the development of a global network of 'Policy Labs' from the foundation we are building in Maastricht. The Hub will therefore serve as a unique platform for experimentation and innovative research on societal and policy challenges, while also fostering knowledge exchange locally and globally through action research and training.

We confirm our commitment to increase collaboration with international agencies, funds and programmes across the UN system to respond better to their policy needs. Our institute will also continue to collaborate with the EU to foster North-South and South-South Cooperation. Through training initiatives and facilitating dialogue, we will further strengthen our support towards developing countries in sharing knowledge, skills, expertise and resources to meet their development goals through concerted efforts.

We will also strengthen our engagement with UN Country Teams, development agencies, financial institutions and civil society to explore how our work supports national, regional and municipal efforts towards achieving the 2030 Agenda. We will develop an institutional strategy to successfully engage with stakeholders and identify opportunities for collaboration and partnerships. Although our research agenda and education opportunities have a global scope, with a particular emphasis on the Global South, we will increase our local engagement by supporting our host city, region and country in their work towards achieving sustainable development.

We will nurture our existing network of partners, while seeking out opportunities to expand and institutionalise these networks. To reinforce our role in the UN system and beyond, we will build a coherent partnership approach to identify strategic opportunities for developing mutually beneficial relationships. To raise the visibility and scope of our research, and ensure that we are in a position to identify and respond to future global challenges through our research activities, this partnership approach will prioritise academic partners, policy institutes and policymakers, and funding agencies. Crucially, we will take a leading role in developing fair research partnerships with the Global South as a means of sharing knowledge, building up capabilities and delivering the institute's contributions and solutions to the pressing problems faced by developing countries.



## INVEST

- in the UNU-MERIT Hub as the institute's incubator for initiating and developing interactive collaboration with local, regional and global stakeholders
- in an impact officer, who will be responsible for developing and implementing our societal and policy engagement strategy
- in a coherent partnership approach to identify and execute strategic opportunities for developing mutually beneficial relationships with academic partners, policy institutes and policymakers, and funding agencies
- in our research communication and capacity development to increase the accessibility of our work to policymakers



## PROVIDE

- resources and support to staff to engage in societal and policy engagement activities, training on community-engaged research, policy and societal engagement, and research communication support
- recognition for staff to engage in societal and policy engagement activities as part of their career development track
- opportunities for community-based and citizen research in the Hub



## REINFORCE

- our role in developing research partnerships with the Global South as a means of sharing knowledge, building up capabilities and delivering the institute's contributions and solutions
- our active participation in UN processes around the world (including our closest UN partners in Brussels) to ensure that our research agenda is aligned with UN priorities, and make better use of our convening power as a UN organisation for maximising our policy impact
- our relationship with the city of Maastricht, the province of Limburg and the Dutch government to develop new partnerships in research, education and training

We will increase visibility in the media through long-term partnerships, via The Conversation and newsrooms across the Global South – to amplify our visibility and make our work both future-facing and globally relevant.

## 7 | Outreach

We consider communication and outreach an integral part of research, education and knowledge mobilisation. Through our communication and outreach efforts, we aim to increase our involvement – and influence – at all levels by directly connecting with our major audiences. Priority targets include donors and partners (the UN, EU, governments, development banks and research networks), as well as students, civil society, media, and our unique ‘dual-umbrella’ hosts at Maastricht University and UNU. In future interactions with key audiences, we aim to highlight the quality, impact and societal value of our work, while demonstrating inclusivity by avoiding jargon and actively engaging with minority and vulnerable groups.

Our communication and outreach efforts will be supported by a clear and consistent narrative, in line with our ambition to be a world-class research and training institute on Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development (see chapter above, ‘Positioning’). Researchers and PhD candidates, as well as selected Master’s students are invited to showcase their work in a variety of ways on our website and social media platforms. We will continue to offer these channels, but will do so in a more coherent and streamlined way, in line with our focus on Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development.

While UNU-MERIT researchers continue to have primary responsibility for reporting and sharing their academic publications, we aim to highlight their output more prominently across our channels. We will improve the accessibility and discoverability of our research data and findings, including via open data

repositories and open-access publications. We will create incentives for staff to engage in these activities, by for example providing training, guidelines and communication assets. To improve the accessibility of our publications, we will share style and branding guidelines during annual workshops. Overall, by focusing on more targeted formats, supported by visually appealing media and infographics, we aim to create a more enabling environment for research uptake.

**Visible near and far**

Events are a powerful means to build our networks and impact. We will continue to host research seminars but will now increasingly focus on policy workshops, delivered in hybrid formats to ensure a global audience. We will convene high-level events at the UNU-MERIT Hub in Maastricht (see chapter above, 'Impact'), Brussels and The Hague, as well as in UN cities in the Global South. Senior officials from the UN, EU and other international bodies will be invited to join our activities and provide insights and training for our staff, students and partners. Through these events, we will provide a platform for stakeholders at various levels to explore how comprehensive innovation can truly promote sustainable development.

We will assume a leadership role in research uptake through various levels and networks. We will coordinate more closely with partners across Maastricht University and the UN system: co-designing campaigns and promoting the work of staff, students and partners. Beyond our internal training and local events, we will further develop external initiatives, including our UNESCO-sponsored workshop series, which combines network and capacity building for researchers, media and policy officials worldwide. In parallel, we will increase visibility in the media through long-term partnerships, via The Conversation and newsrooms across the Global South – to amplify our visibility and make our work both future-facing and globally relevant. We aim to increase our outreach via multiple languages, not just English as the main UN working language, but also French for West Africa, Spanish for Latin America, and Dutch for our host government and local audiences.



# Actions



## INVEST

- in reinforcing the communications team with an Events & Networking Officer, working mainly on those areas but also supporting the team across the spectrum of activities including editorial, media relations and work on the upcoming global UNU website
- in the creation of new communication assets tailored to reach, influence and 'speak the language' of all target audiences
- in the findability and accessibility of data and publications resulting from our research
- in hybrid and online formats to ensure our events are accessible to audiences worldwide



## PROVIDE

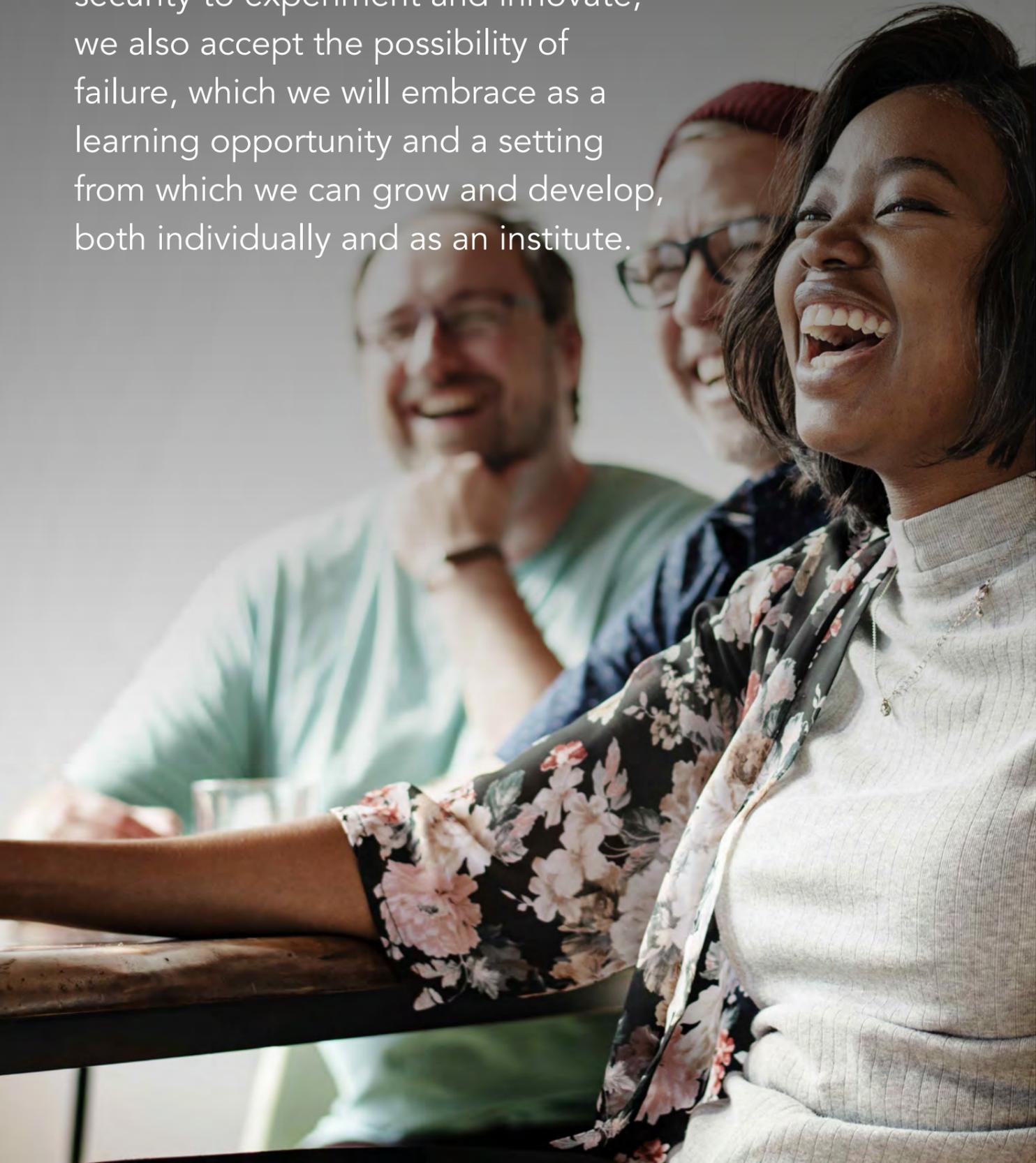
- guidance and training for all staff on research communication and uptake
- targeted formats and channels, supported by visually appealing media and infographics
- training on pressing and emerging policy challenges by hosting sustainable development policymakers
- platforms for stakeholders at different levels and contexts to discuss how comprehensive innovation can promote sustainable development



## REINFORCE

- the internal capacity of staff and students to write for non-academic audiences, to use social media more effectively and to represent the institute more consistently
- dialogues between academics and policymakers to facilitate knowledge exchange in policy and practice
- engagement in policy debates to contribute to pressing and emerging policy challenges and help shape agendas
- the translation of research findings, wherever possible, into policy briefs
- our engagement locally with Maastricht University and globally with UNU

By providing individual staff and teams with the freedom, space and security to experiment and innovate, we also accept the possibility of failure, which we will embrace as a learning opportunity and a setting from which we can grow and develop, both individually and as an institute.



## 8 | Well-being

**UNU-MERIT is committed to promoting a healthy and high-quality working environment for all active members of our community and staff, as well as temporary members such as PhD candidates, visiting researchers and professorial fellows. We will foster an inclusive and transparent environment based on the core values of inclusivity and freedom from discrimination, freedom of thought and expression.**

We are committed to providing a safe and inclusive workplace, which adheres to the principles of the UN Charter, while for their part our staff members respect the UNU Personnel Policy and the Maastricht University Human Resources Policy.

Overall, the institute treats all staff members fairly and equally, irrespective of contract type. We will establish a career development programme, thus changing the way we recognise and reward talent in line with recent initiatives led by Maastricht University. Our ambition is to provide clear guidance on how our staff can advance their careers within the institute, and provide support for temporary staff to prepare for the next phase in their career journey.

We will provide early-career research staff with the support to build up their career paths, as well as a clear onward trajectory for established researchers. We will create opportunities for early-career researchers to maximise the impact of their research on policy and practice, providing opportunities and incentives to take leadership roles through both disciplinary research areas and the multidisciplinary Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development agenda. It is also our ambition to further strengthen a culture in which researchers feel

valued in pursuing their intellectual curiosity, fulfilling their potential and maximising the impact of their research in diverse ways.

In recruiting new talent, we aspire to be the destination of choice for the best researchers in our core areas of research, providing a stimulating environment for those who want to develop an exciting research agenda in these areas based upon curiosity and disciplinary expertise. We further seek to recruit outstanding researchers who can connect with other fields – both internally and externally – in developing Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development, and who can develop the reputation of the institute in this multidisciplinary endeavour. To do this, we will identify individuals with strong disciplinary profiles and potential that are able to link the academic and policy worlds, address major societal challenges through their research, and inspire others in a collegial and collaborative manner. Our recruitment policy will acknowledge our privileged position as an institute of the United Nations University. We will therefore seek to attract, retain and nurture talented researchers from around the world – particularly from the Global South – to ensure a diverse intellectual community. Through our recruitment we aim to promote diversity and inclusion in our staff, encouraging all qualified individuals to apply to join our institute irrespective of gender, nationality, religious or ethnic backgrounds, including persons with disabilities.

UNU-MERIT encourages a team-based approach throughout the institute, in which multidisciplinary teams focus on specific research agendas under the banner of Comprehensive Innovation for Sustainable Development. We will continue to advocate for, invest in and develop this pluralistic approach to research.

# Actions



## INVEST

- in a well-being officer and team to monitor and strengthen well-being and the sense of community in UNU-MERIT through various social activities and other initiatives
- in increasing access to available support structures at Maastricht University and UNU
- in a new career development programme and a new approach to recognition and reward for all staff members
- in providing a professional development programme with coaching opportunities for all at UNU-MERIT
- in flexible working and meeting spaces in the UNU-MERIT building



## PROVIDE

- inclusive and transparent decision-making and feedback processes at institutional and team levels
- an environment where students and staff of all backgrounds can collaboratively work and interact with each other in a safe space of inclusivity, compassion and mutual respect
- institutional support for early-career research staff to build up their career paths, and for a clear trajectory for career progression for more established staff member



## REINFORCE

- our recruitment policy to attract, retain and nurture talented staff from around the world – including from the Global South – to ensure a diverse intellectual community
- a culture in which all UNU-MERIT members feel valued for their contributions to the institute
- our efforts to acknowledge, celebrate and reward success at an organisational, team and individual level
- a team-based approach and spirit throughout UNU-MERIT that encourages collective ambition as well as individual ownership and empowerment

We will acknowledge, celebrate and reward success at an organisational, team and individual level. By providing individual staff and teams with the freedom, space and security to experiment and innovate, we also accept the possibility of failure, which we will embrace as a learning opportunity and a setting from which we can grow and develop, both individually and as an institute. Our staff can expect support and investment in developing research ideas and agendas that are promising and novel, but with uncertain outcomes.

Diversity and inclusivity are instrumental for UNU-MERIT to achieve success and fulfil its mission. We will champion diversity by promoting and nurturing an inclusive working environment. We strive for an institute where students and staff of all backgrounds can collaboratively work and interact with each other in a safe space of inclusivity, compassion and mutual respect. As a UNU institute, we will tackle future challenges in an inclusive manner that removes barriers, builds bridges and promotes and values diversity. We aim to go well beyond compliance and observance, to proactively foster an environment that

is committed to equity and accountability, and values academic and societal benefits that embrace inclusivity and diversity. We are further committed to achieving gender parity across all levels as an essential step for a diverse and inclusive organisation. Overall, we aim for an increased representation from the Global South amongst our students and staff.

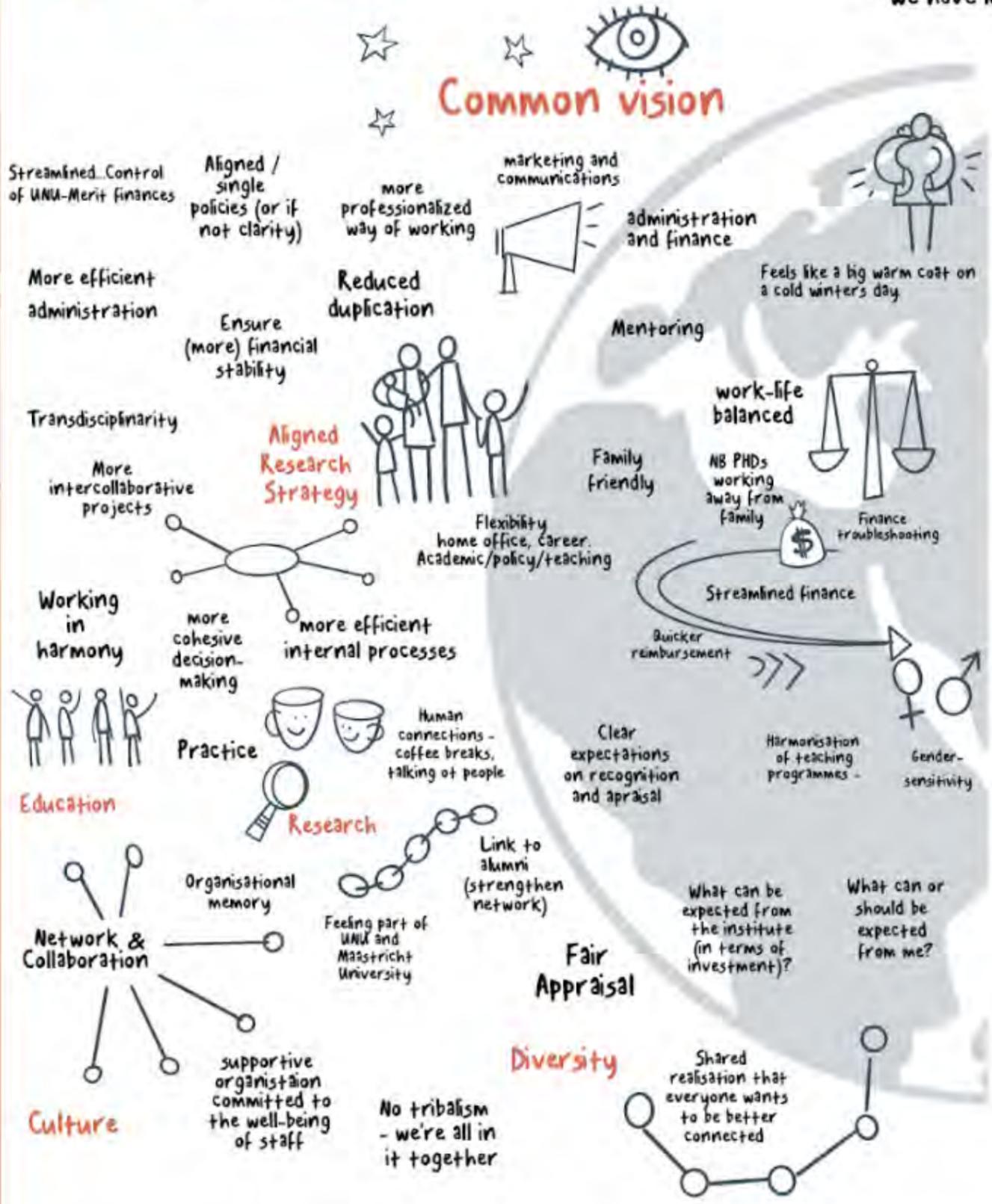
COVID-19 has created stressful times for all of us at UNU-MERIT, but also highlighted our individual and collective resilience. Simultaneously, it showed us the importance of increasing access to available support structures (in particular within UNU and UM) to empower our staff with the right tools and knowledge to cultivate their well-being and build their resilience. We will appoint a well-being officer and team who will monitor and take action to strengthen and sustain the sense of community within our institution. COVID-19 has also offered opportunities for adopting a hybrid working environment, including by supporting our work remotely. We will further develop plans to enable more flexible working spaces, and to create more shared working and meeting spaces throughout the building.

# INTERNAL

Better internal comms as a bridge to better external comms - we have multiple actors

# EXTERNAL

## Common vision



## To understand what we stand for



**UNU-MERIT**

Boschstraat 24  
6211 AX Maastricht  
Netherlands

Phone: +31 43 388 4400  
Web: [www.merit.unu.edu](http://www.merit.unu.edu)

Facebook: [UnitedNationsUniversityMerit](https://www.facebook.com/UnitedNationsUniversityMerit)  
Instagram: [@unumerit](https://www.instagram.com/unumerit)  
Twitter: [@UNUMERIT](https://twitter.com/UNUMERIT)

**IMPRINT**

Publisher: UNU-MERIT  
Design: [project-pinpoint.com](http://project-pinpoint.com)  
Photos: Adobe Stock,  
M. Silva-Vargas, J.Vos