REPORT

on

Independent Review of Progress on HUC's Transition to Independence [1 Jan – 30 Jun 2025]

Submitted to

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)
Khumaltar, Lalitpur
Kathmandu, Nepal

Submitted by

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Contents

List of abbreviations

APAARI	Asia Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions
GA	General Assembly
HKH	The Hindu Kush Himalaya
HUC	The Himalayan University Consortium
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
IGO	Intergovernmental organization
KU	Kathmandu University
PAC	Programme Advisory Committee
SAU	South Asian University
TOR	Terms of Reference
TU	Tribhuvan University
UCAS	The University of the Chinese Academy of Sciences

Executive Summary

This independent review assesses the progress of the Himalayan University Consortium (HUC) towards its independence during Phase 1 (January 1 to June 30, 2025), as mandated by the Board of Governors' Programme Advisory Committee (PAC) of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) . This review's primary objective was to determine if HUC had secured a formal agreement with a new host organization or demonstrated significant, documented progress on legal registration with a clear path to completion.

- **Hosting Arrangement:** HUC did not secure a formal hosting agreement with another organization by the end of Phase 1. While institutions like the Asia Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI) expressed interest, no binding offers or signed agreements materialized. Furthermore, national universities in Nepal (Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University), initially considered, declined to host HUC due to their institutional limitations, rather suggested that HUC be hosted by an international or intergovernmental organization.
- **Legal Registration:** HUC did not achieve legal registration within the designated timeframe. No registration application was submitted, nor were key milestones achieved within Phase 1. A legal firm advised that establishing HUC as an intergovernmental organization (IGO) in Nepal would be a lengthy and complex process, estimated to take 18-24 months.
- **Coordination and Cooperation:** Coordination between the HUC Steering Committee and the HUC Secretariat remained a challenge, with key decisions often made without Secretariat consultation, despite ICIMOD's continued financial and logistical support.

The review concludes that HUC did not succeed in finding a new host or making strong progress on legal registration within the specified period. This outcome supports *Option 2* as outlined by the PAC, which recommends:

- **Integrating HUC into ICIMOD's Regional Action and Global Advocacy Strategic Group (SG3):** This involves dissolving the current Steering Committee and eliminating external reporting lines to streamline HUC governance.
- **Continuing HUC's activities under ICIMOD's ongoing programmes:** This ensures continuity of HUC programmes uninterrupted and alignment with ICIMOD's institutional priorities.

Independent Review of HUC's Progress Towards Its Independence

1. Introduction and Background

The Himalayan University Consortium (HUC) was founded in 2007 by ICIMOD to build a dynamic mountain knowledge network for collaboration among universities and educational institutions in the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region. From the onset, ICIMOD hosted and funded HUC. Over the last seventeen years, HUC grew to over 100 institutional members. However, it moved away from its core objective of delivering on mountain curricula in Himalayan universities and deviated from the ICIMOD's mission. An independent evaluation in 2023 identified HUC's governance misalignment with ICIMOD, lack of accountability, weak ownership by HUC members, and less internal coordination as key issues that hindered the delivery of results per ICIMOD's commitments

The Himalayan University Consortium (HUC) stands as a crucial academic network dedicated to connecting universities and researchers across and beyond the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region. HUC is mandated to foster mountain leadership and capacity building to deliver mountain curricula in HKH universities and promote collaborative research and north-south and south-south partnerships to generate credible knowledge to inform policy for addressing HKH issues and challenges. Recognizing the inherent value of HUC, the ICIMOD's Board of Governors-Programme Advisory Committee (PAC) in its December 2024 meeting acknowledged HUC's significance and explicitly endorsed its continued operation. The Program Advisory Committee (PAC) recommended a two-phase roadmap for HUC's transition to independence. Phase 1, from January 1 to June 30, 2025, required HUC to take two concrete steps towards independence.

This independent review, commissioned by ICIMOD management in late June 2025, assessed the progress made during this first phase.

2. Objectives of the Review

The core objective of this independent review was to factually assess whether HUC took the PAC-recommended "concrete steps" towards independence during Phase 1 (January to June 2025). Specifically, it aimed to determine if the HUC Steering Committee secured a formal agreement with a new host organization or demonstrated strong, documented progress on legal registration with certainty of completion within the next six months (second phase from 1 July to 31 December 2025).

3. Scope of the Review

This review focused on the progress made towards HUC's independence based on two options as laid out by the PAC:

- **Option 1:** Whether "concrete steps taken" are evident in HUC's path to independence. This implies a formal agreement (through a letter) from another organization to host HUC, taking over responsibilities and risks, or documented strong progress on legal registration by June 30, 2025, with certainty of completion within the next six months.

- **Option 2:** If no concrete progress is made by June 30, 2025, indicating HUC is not ready to exist as an independent organization, HUC would be integrated as a network initiative within ICIMOD's SG3 programme, and external governance structures will no longer exist.

The scope of this review was to make a factual assessment of HUC's progress by 30 June 2025. It has explicitly excluded HUC governance-related activities and the reviewer's ideas or opinions.

4. Review Question

The central question guiding this review was: "Did HUC succeed in finding a new host? Or did HUC manage to make strong progress on legal registration?"

If the answer to either part of this question was "YES," the reliability of the information provided was tested, and the evidence was validated.

5. Methodology and Approach

This review was conducted according to the proposed outline and terms of reference. The process involved asking key questions and recording responses, and evaluating supporting evidence provided. The review focused on assessing the current status against stated objectives, particularly concerning hosting arrangements and legal registration.

The review followed a mixed-method approach grounded in ICIMOD's guidelines, as outlined in the Terms of Reference:

1. Document Review: Thoroughly review all relevant documents made available to confirm evidence of progress against the review objective. The following documents included a desk review of the documents and analysis:

   - The PAC Recommendations

   - ToR_HUC Independent Review

   - HUC Secretariat's Progress report phase 1 (Jan – Jun 2025) on implementation of PAC Recommendations and all linked documents (Annexes)

   - Gandhi & Associates' Legal Opinion Document, and

   - All formal correspondence – official letters (TU and KU), Secretariat's communication with SC Chair and HUC consultant, SC meeting minutes/notes, and interim SC chair's updates to PAC chair.

2. Stakeholder Consultations: The virtual meetings were conducted to finalize the tools and methodology with HUC and the team. The final tools/ questionnaire (Annex-1) was emailed to the Interim HUC Secretariat Lead and the Interim Chair of the HUC Steering Committee to collect the information and evidence related to the study.

3. Validation of Evidence: The documents provided by the HUC Secretariat such as HUC Progress report phase 1 (Jan – Jun 2025) and Annexes (with active links) were assessed to check the reliability of the information provided. The validation process included the Source Authenticity, Relevance to Objectives, Consistency and Triangulation, Clarity, Timeliness, Contextual Accuracy, and claimed Validation against evidence (e.g., meeting minutes, letters,

annexes). While reliability was assessed based on documentation transparency and cross-referencing. The documents were observed as well.

4. Report Preparation: The final report was prepared based on the report outline provided by the HUC Secretariat.

6. Analysis of the assessment

6.1 Progress Toward Hosting Arrangement.

By the end of Phase 1 (June 30, 2025), the HUC Steering Committee (SC) had not secured another organization agreeing to formally host the HUC Secretariat. There was no formal hosting offer or signed agreement. While the Secretariat lead and the Interim Chair of the HUC Steering Committee consistently emphasized finding a host, the HUC consultant was perhaps reluctant to find a host from the HKH region.

Meetings were held with leaders from various institutions, including the Asia Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI), the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences (UCAS), South Asian University (SAU), Tribhuvan University (TU), and Kathmandu University (KU). The Secretariat of APAARI, Bangkok, indicated its willingness to assist HUC in its transition to sustainability as of February 7, 2025, but lacked binding outcomes.

The HUC Steering/Executive Committee concurred that the HUC Secretariat should be located in an HKH country with enabling conditions for international mobility and cooperation. Nepal was identified as the only such country in the current geo-political context.

Crucially, the Vice Chancellors of Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University, while highly supportive of HUC, stated that national universities in Nepal do not possess the appropriate institutional capability to host an international network with HUC's mandate. Consequently, the option for HUC to be hosted by a country-based university was ruled out and no longer pursued.

Question	Response Status	Key Evidence	Reliability Assessment
Potential host identified?	Partially (Responses show yes and No as 50%)	APAARI expressed interest in hosting; KU/TU is not intended to host.	High (Letters from KU/TU VCs, APAARI meeting minutes).
Formal agreement/MOU signed?	No	No agreement (HUC-APAARI) due to an unsigned Partnership Statement.	High (Undisputed by both responses).

Key Findings

1. Hosting Agreement Progress: **NO**

- **Evidence**: No evidence of willingness to host, offer to host, or an Agreement signed to host was found.

- o Tribhuvan University (TU) and Kathmandu University (KU) were supportive of HUC becoming an independent organisation   recommended HUC hosting by an intergovernmental body instead (letters dated 18 Mar & 15 Jun 2025).

- o Visits to APAARI (Bangkok) and UCAS (China) yielded no formal offers. APAARI proposed a non-binding collaboration only.

- o No hosting agreement or Letter of Intent was signed between HUC and the hosting organization.

- **Reliability**: High (official university letters, meeting records).

6.2 Progress in Legal Registration

The proposed pathway to establish HUC as an intergovernmental organization was found to be lengthy and complex, with an estimated 18-month timeline. The MS Gandhi Associates - a Kathmandu-based law firm, for legal advice on HUC's registration as a legal entity in Nepal, when consulted by HUC's consultant in May 2025, prepared a Legal Opinion Document outlining all possible options for registering HUC as a legal entity in Nepal. The firm recommended establishing HUC as an intergovernmental organization (IGO) based in Nepal, which may take 18-24 months, depending on various external factors.

Question	Response Status	Key Evidence	Reliability Assessment
Legal registration achieved?	No	Requires a Declaration of Regional Cooperation from 4–5 national higher education bodies.	High (Legal Opinion, Gandhi & Associates).
Milestones completed?	Partial	Legal Opinion Document produced by MS Gandhi & Associates.	High (Annex 3, HUC Secretariat's Progress report phase 1 (Jan – Jun 2025).

Key findings

2. Legal Registration Progress: **NO**

- **Evidence**:

- o No application for HUC'slegal registration was prepared and submitted, and no milestones (e.g., draft statutes, government correspondence) were achieved.

- o A legal firm (Gandhi & Associates) engaged in May 2025 advised registering HUC as an intergovernmental organization (IGO) in Nepal—a process estimated at 18–24 months.

- **Reliability**: High (legal opinion document).

6.3 Coordination and Cooperation

HUC SC coordination with the Secretariat was very limited throughout the first phase of transition. Despite ICIMOD's financial support and continued hosting of the HUC secretariat with key staff, the HUC Steering Committee made all key decisions without consultation. SC

decisions to defer GA from Feb to April, plan for HUC Summit, email-based voting for GA decision, using draft ballot paper (without addressing Secretariat's comments), and meeting potential host institutions, etc., were all made by SC without consulting the Secretariat.

Despite the Secretariat's reminders, HUC Consultant (with copy to interim SC chair) for better coordination and stronger alignment with PAC recommendations, HUC Consultant kept the Secretariat least involved and informed about SC affairs. This resulted in several procedural and governance misalignments and often made the Secretariat's work unprecedentedly difficult and even impossible at times.

On the other hand, ICIMOD management fully complied with the PAC directives and refrained from becoming part of any HUC governance bodies to avoid the potential conflict of interest.

7. Rational assessment with evidence

The HUC SC worked hard to identify and secure another organisation willing to host HUC and establish it as a legal entity. Still, the evidence overwhelmingly confirms no tangible progress toward either hosting or legal pathways.

8. Recommendation

Based on a comprehensive analysis of the HUC transition efforts during the first phase, we recommend that:

HUC was unable to secure a host institution or complete legal registration and documentation within the designated timeframe. This outcome strongly suggests that Option 2 outlined by the PAC is the most viable immediate course of action:

- **Integrate HUC into ICIMOD's Strategic Group 3 (SG3).** This integration would involve dissolving the current Steering Committee and eliminating external reporting lines, streamlining governance and operations.
- **Continue HUC's programmatic activities under ICIMOD programmes.** This will ensure continuity of essential programmes uninterrupted and will align them with ICIMOD's broader institutional priorities.

9. Conclusion

This independent review focused on two key aspects: securing a formal hosting agreement with a new organization or demonstrating strong, documented progress on legal registration concludes that HUC SC did not secure a formal hosting agreement and, despite efforts, did not make strong progress on legal registration within the specified timeframe. Although APAARI and UCAS expressed their conditional interest, no binding agreements were established. The two premier national universities in Nepal, such as Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University, declined to host due to institutional limitations.

Hence, HUC SC did not succeed in finding a new host or making strong progress on legal registration within the assigned period. This outcome supports PAC's Option 2, which suggests integrating HUC into ICIMOD's SG3 programme, dissolving the Steering Committee, and transferring programmatic activities to ICIMOD-managed programmes and results.

References

- HUC Secretariat's Progress report phase 1 (Jan – Jun 2025)
- HUCCharter2015 w signing page_Reformatted_110724
- HUCBylaws2018_EndorsedByGeneralAssembly31Oct2018_Reformatted_110724
- Proposed Outline_ Independent Review of HUC's Progress Towards Its Independence 2025.docx
- Final ToR_HUC Independent Review.pdf
- Proposal for the Independent Review of HUC Transition Phase 1.pdf
- https://www.icimod.org/
- https://www.icimod.org/initiative/huc/
- HUC Charter 2025-effective1May-1, 2025
- HUCBylaws2025_effective1May_layout FINAL_030725
- Final Report FirstPhase HUC Transition JanJun2025-w references to PAC Recomms
- Cover Letter Ex-Com Chair-Final Report-response concerning PAC Recomms
- Annex3-Legal Opinion On HUC Viable Pathways for Recognition In Nepal-Ghandi&Associate_230625
- Annex2-Letter by TU VC-KC Khadga.
- Annex2_LetterOf KU VC_Prof.Dr Achuyt Wagle
- ICIMOD PAC recommendations on HUC Dec 2025

Annex-1: Tools and Questionnaire for Information Collection

Given the core review question, "Did HUC succeed in finding a new host? Or did HUC manage to make strong progress on legal registration? If the answer is a YES in either case, then the reviewer tested the reliability of the information provided and validated the evidence. The tools and questionnaire focused on gathering factual evidence for these two potential pathways to independence.

Objective: To assess documented evidence of "concrete steps" towards HUC's independence, either through a hosting agreement or legal registration progress.

Tool 1: Document Review Checklist

This checklist guides the systematic review of all available documents to confirm evidence of progress against the review objective.

Document Type/Area	Specific Information	Status (Found/Not Found)	Notes/Key Findings (Include specific dates, names, key clauses)	Remarks
For Option 1: Formal Hosting Agreement				
	Did HUC find a hosting institution for its secretariat?	**Yes / No**		
	If Yes			
Letter of Agreement/MOU from the potential host organization	1. Formal offer to host HUC			
	2. Details on responsibilities and risks being taken over by the new host			
	3. Duration of the agreement			
	4. Funding contribution arrangements (if specified)			
Correspondence/Meeting Minutes	5. Discussions and negotiations with potential host organizations			
	6. Evidence of due diligence conducted by HUC/potential host			
	7. Internal HUC discussions regarding hosting options			
HUC Strategic/Transition Plans (if any)	8. Specific strategies for identifying and securing a host organization			
	9. Timelines and milestones related to securing a host			
For Option 2: Legal Registration Progress				
	Please clarify whether HUC has been able to legally register itself as a separate entity.	**Yes / No**		

	If Yes			
Official Legal Registration Documents	Please provide the following evidence.			
	1. Legal registration document.			
	2. Proof of submission of registration application			
	3. Certificates of incorporation or similar legal establishment documents (if obtained)			
	4. Official communication from relevant government/legal authorities regarding registration status			
General Progress Documents				
HUC Progress Reports (Jan-Jun 2025)	1. Sections detailing progress on the independence roadmap			
	2. Challenges encountered and mitigation strategies			
ICIMOD-HUC Communications	3. Correspondence regarding the transition roadmap and expectations			

Tool 2: To understand the internal efforts and progress made by HUC toward securing independence.

Document Type/ Area	Specific Information	Responses
1. **Progress Toward Hosting Arrangement**	1. Has HUC identified a potential host institution?	
	2. What steps have been taken to engage with the host organization?	
	3. Is there a Letter of Agreement or MoU signed? Can you share it?	
	4. What responsibilities and risks has the host agreed to take over?	
2. **Legal Registration Process**	1. Has HUC been able to get legal registration?	
	2. What specific milestones have been achieved?	

	3. Is there formal documentation proving progress?	
3. Coordination with ICIMOD	1. How has the HUC Steering Committee coordinated with ICIMOD during this phase?	
	2. What kind of support (financial, technical, logistical) has been received by the HUC Secretariat from ICIMOD?	
4. Challenges and Enablers	1. What were the main challenges faced by the HUC Steering Committee in finding the host and in the legal registration process?	
	2. What factors have supported or constrained the process?	
5. Supporting Documents	1. Could it be possible to provide relevant documentation (meeting minutes, correspondence, bylaws, legal documents)?	
6. **Any other relevant documents**	1. Please share any other relevant information about the study	