

ANNEX

ISAU COMMENTS ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR STAFF OF THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THE 2024 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ETHICS OFFICE AND THE FEASIBILITY STUDY ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INDEPENDENT OMBUDSPERSON'S OFFICE

1. We were told that the comments of the staff associations related solely to the terms of employment and working conditions of the staff, and that the independence of the Ethics Office had to be preserved. In accordance with this request, the following remarks relate exclusively to the actions of the Office which have an impact on the terms of employment and working conditions of the staff. The ethics report and the feasibility study provide information that the staff associations cannot ignore without failing in the mandate entrusted to them by the Member States.

A. Annual report of the Ethics Office (2024) (document [221 EX/30](#))

2. A significant increase is noted in the number of approaches made to the Ethics Office in 2024, with advice issued on 421 occasions compared with 283 in 2023. One wonders whether this increase can be explained by a greater visibility of the Office and an improved speak-up culture, or whether it expresses a deterioration in the working climate, as reflected in the feedback we receive from colleagues. In any event, efforts to disseminate a genuine culture of ethics are confirmed as a priority, in that they meet the expectations of the staff as a whole.

3. The Ethics Office's awareness-raising and training efforts are all the more noteworthy as they reveal an increase in requests for ethical advice. Among these initiatives, the Ethics Kit helps to raise staff awareness of the ethical issues that concern them directly. However, ISAU notes a lack of understanding of the reporting procedures and mandate of the Ethics Office, in particular its role vis-à-vis the Investigation Office of the Division of Internal Oversight Services (IOS).

4. We note that the main concerns of staff remain unchanged: conflicts in the workplace, harassment and job-related concerns, and that no tangible improvement has been observed. The summary report on harassment issues should therefore give us cause for alarm, with 65 requests for advice under the Anti-Harassment Policy.

5. Finally, concerning another important aspect for staff, we fully support the Ethics Office's recommendation to integrate ethical performance indicators into supervisors' evaluations, and to take action in the case of shortcomings. This approach is in line with our demand for transparent and meaningful 360° evaluation, enabling us to identify management shortcomings and prevent inappropriate behaviour. We also support the idea of systematically assessing managers' ability to manage a team during the recruitment process. Let us stress that improvements in this area will only be possible if the Administration works to change recruitment practices, which are still too often considered a prerogative of the sectors. Too often, HRM is seen as a secondary player whose concerns are contingent.

6. The summary report (Annex to the Annual Report of the Ethics Office) is also of interest to staff, as it clearly shows the persistence of a deleterious and hostile working environment, which continues to deteriorate. IOS, whose detailed annual report we welcome, only confirms this regrettable observation. Figures 18 and 19 show:

- A worrying rise in the number of allegations in 2024 (55 versus 35 in 2023)
- A significant increase in the number of investigations carried out and cases substantiated after investigation (26 in 2024 versus 6 in 2023).
- An increase in allegations of moral harassment (22 in 2024 versus 15 in 2023).

This points to the existence of a systemic problem within UNESCO calling for an urgent response from the Administration.

7. In the face of harassment and abuse of power, it is more necessary than ever to better train supervisors and establish a genuine culture of accountability. We reiterate the importance of 360° evaluation as a tool for identifying problem behaviour and guaranteeing quality management.

8. We also note the low rate of disciplinary action taken following IOS investigations in 2024. Out of 29 substantiated allegations, only 4 had resulted in concrete action at the time of reporting (so 25 were still pending). It would be useful to have explanations for the reasons for this discrepancy and the delays in processing by the Administration.

9. Finally, we note that the Ethics Office has raised the issue of disproportionate use of affiliated personnel. We share its view that, in addition to being a source of insecurity for staff, these contracts lead to high staff turnover and a loss of institutional memory. As mentioned in our comments on the Human Resources Strategy 2023–2027, over-reliance on this type of contract must not be generalized.

10. UNESCO must adopt a proactive approach to curb the deterioration of the working climate and ensure a respectful and equitable professional environment, enabling the Organization to carry out its mission. As the Ethics Office points out, supervisors and managers have a key role to play in building a strong ethical culture. Their commitment and responsibility must be clearly demonstrated. Above all, a genuine ethical culture cannot exist without a firm commitment on the part of the Administration to adopt a policy of zero tolerance of unacceptable behaviour.

B. Feasibility study on the establishment of an independent ombudsperson's office
(document [221 EX/27](#))

11. ISAU fully supports the establishment of an independent ombudsperson's office, and will closely monitor its independence and effectiveness. Reform was needed, as the current mediation system has demonstrated its flaws and limitations, failing to meet colleagues' needs. It is essential for UNESCO to have a reliable platform for informal conflict resolution, both for staff and for the Organization, as it avoids lengthy procedures, high costs for the Organization, and above all stress that is not conducive to maintaining trust between staff and the Administration.

12. We recommend waiting for the findings and recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) review of the ombudsperson and mediation function before establishing an ombudsperson's office, determining its structure and defining its mandate, to ensure that the initiative is based on best practice. To guarantee his or her independence, the ombudsperson should have a single, non-renewable term of office, with a ban on holding a UNESCO post for a certain period after the end of his or her term. It is also essential that the office is able to operate autonomously, without interference from the Administration.

13. The report rightly emphasizes that the ombudsperson's role is to act as an impartial intermediary between staff and Administration. Given that this impartiality is a prerequisite for the ombudsperson's ability to win the confidence of both staff and Administration, we consider that it is essential that the holders of this position be recruited according to a procedure in which the staff associations themselves are involved. It goes without saying that the appointment decision will always rest with the Director-General, but the fact remains that an independent ombudsperson's office would be unable to fulfil its mandate effectively if its incumbent were perceived solely as a player who owes his or her appointment to the Administration alone.

14. With regard to the role and responsibilities of the ombudsperson's office, we regret that the study does not sufficiently emphasize the importance of the office's accountability. Similarly, regular, detailed reports are needed in order to be able to monitor trends and systemic problems in workplace

conflicts and their evolution. These reports should be communicated to the Director-General, HRM and the Executive Board, so that appropriate solutions can be put in place.

15. In conclusion, we reaffirm our support for the establishment of an independent ombudsperson's office, convinced of its usefulness in informal conflict resolution. However, the Administration also plays a crucial role in the prevention and informal resolution of conflicts in the workplace. In some cases, we have observed that the Administration refuses to resolve problems despite its non-compliance with the rules, persisting in its approach even when it is obvious that a case before the Administrative Tribunal of the International Labour Organization (ILOAT) will result in the Organization being sanctioned, entailing substantial compensation. These costs underline the need for greater accountability and sanctions against those responsible for decisions taken in violation of the rules in force.