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FOLLOW-UP TO DECISIONS AND RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD AND THE GENERAL CONFERENCE AT THEIR PREVIOUS SESSIONS

PART III

HUMAN RESOURCES ISSUES

ADDENDUM

COMMENTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL STAFF ASSOCIATION OF UNESCO (ISAU)

SUMMARY

A. Human Resources Strategy for 2023-2027

Pursuant to Item 9.2.7 of the UNESCO Human Resources Manual, the International Staff Association of UNESCO (ISAU) submits its comments on human resources issues (document 221 EX/5.III.A).

1. We have read the Administration's document reporting on progress made in implementing the Human Resources Strategy for 2023-2027. We regret that no additions or rectifications to the targets have been made as we proposed should be done to address the issues raised in our previous comments, particularly with regard to transparency of recruitment, geographical distribution, HRM's involvement in the recruitment process, and well-being and health in the workplace. Furthermore, the findings in the annual reports of the Division of Internal Oversight Services (IOS) (document [221 EX/29](#)) and the Ethics Office (document [221 EX/30](#)) on the increase in moral harassment reflect the toxic and worrying working climate, and call for swift and effective action by the Administration. This means that HRM needs to be agile and readjust the targets in its roadmap in order to take the necessary measures.



Job: 2500252

General comments

2. HRM refers to “steady progress” in the introduction, but this assertion is not borne out by the content of the document, and even less so by Annex I, which clearly illustrates the difficulties encountered by HRM in implementing the Strategy, with a significant number of targets not yet achieved. Care must be taken not to accumulate implementation delays. The UNESCO Employee Engagement Survey conducted in 2024 seems to have highlighted many of these unmet targets. In this respect, we fail to understand the inexplicable delay in publishing the results of the survey. All these shortcomings reflect a worrying reality: a loss of confidence in the Administration on the part of staff.

3. Generally speaking, the document in question is too vague and sorely lacking in precise, relevant indicators enabling an objective assessment of the Strategy’s progress and deficiencies. Even more worryingly, no concrete corrective action is proposed to remedy the shortcomings identified.

Aim 1: Attract and retain talent and expertise

Workforce planning

4. We ask for the 2023 Audit of Workforce Planning ([IOS/AUD/2023/11](#)) and its Agreed Management Actions (AMA) to be taken into account rigorously. What concrete measures have been put in place to respond to these observations? At this stage, it is difficult to know whether the shortcomings identified by IOS have been corrected or whether they persist. It is important to note that in its annual report, IOS states that “[t]he results of the field office audits carried out in 2024 have again raised recurring observations such as the absence of UNESCO [...] Strategies and Resource Mobilization plans, inadequate workforce [...]”.

5. HRM indicates that it will continue to meet with the sectors so that they take into account “other HR processes”. What are these processes? No details are provided, which makes this statement of little practical use. We need concrete, measurable commitments rather than vague words.

6. On the question of geographical mobility, we are waiting to find out the consequences of the lessons learned from the last exercise (2023–2024) and the measures that will be taken to improve it, or even whether it will be deemed useful to continue the mobility exercise. Let us recall that as it stands, mobility is stressful for staff and requires the mobilization of substantial financial and human resources, with the end result being more than disappointing.

Recruitment and outreach activities

7. While no one can deny the importance of outreach in order to diversify recruitment, it must be stressed that the appointment is the crucial step. It is essential not to merely attract candidates, but to ensure that recruitment leads to concrete, effective appointments.

8. Furthermore, Annex 1, Aim 1, Action 2, Target 2, states that the objective of “75% of all positions meeting the target timeline of 130 days” has not been achieved.

9. The proposal to recruit on the basis of generic profiles runs the risk of profoundly contradicting the specialized nature of UNESCO’s Professionals, whose official designation, it is recalled, is that of “programme specialist”. This designation is not insignificant, as it reflects the specific expertise required for UNESCO’s missions. As a specialized agency, UNESCO requires experts with particular skills for its programmes. The adoption of generic profiles could lead to a deskilling of the Organization, thereby compromising the effectiveness of its missions. It is crucial to put measures in place to counter this risk, such as integrating programme-specific criteria in the recruitment process and ensuring that candidates’ skills match job requirements. Recruitment must be aligned with UNESCO’s specific missions so as to ensure their success and maintain the quality of its interventions.

10. We welcome the ongoing review of recruitment policies and practices by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) and await its findings and recommendations. However, we would like to see immediate measures implemented: greater transparency, better involvement of HRM in the recruitment process, and respect for recruitment timelines. It is imperative that HRM play a more active role in order to ensure genuine fairness in the process.

Performance management

11. We welcome the fact that IOS has launched a survey as part of its audit of UNESCO's performance management system. We will rely heavily on the findings and recommendations of the audit to demand a revision of the flawed performance appraisal policy, in particular the absence of any right to contest professional reports. We also hope that the IOS recommendations will finally dispel the persistent ambiguity surrounding 360° evaluation.

Aim 2 - Inclusion and diversity

Geographical distribution and gender balance

12. While we are pleased to note that the number of under-represented States has fallen, and that the number of normally represented States has risen, we need to redouble our efforts with regard to non-represented and over-represented States.

13. With regard to gender equality, we note that the IOS 2024 annual report highlights low take-up of training courses. If UNESCO really wants to make progress on these issues, HRM must urge the sectors to increase staff participation in training courses and ensure that their content is adapted to today's challenges.

14. We also welcome the initiative on digital reporting, which represents a step towards greater transparency. However, to be fully exploitable, these reports must be accompanied by detailed tables enabling data to be cross-referenced. Among other things, it is essential to avoid errors concerning staff movements and to ensure that each factor is measured over the same time period in order to guarantee a reliable and relevant analysis, as we pointed out in our comments on geographical distribution at the 220th session ([220 EX/5.IV.B Add. 2](#)).¹

Disability inclusion

15. We salute the Administration's sustained efforts in the field of disability inclusion and the measures taken in this respect. ISAU obviously remains ready to contribute to the development of guidelines on reasonable accommodation and the updating of the policy on the employment of persons with disabilities, which should also apply to colleagues in the field.

¹ Para. 9: "In addition, we note certain inconsistencies between the data contained in the Administration's report and the staff movements regularly published by HRM. For instance:

- Annex IV does not list any appointments in the Social and Human Sciences Sector (SHS), although we have recorded at least four based on staff movements;
- at least four other appointments (notably to the Priority Africa and External Relations Sector (PAX) and the Natural Sciences Sector (SC)) are not listed in Annex IV, whereas they do appear in the staff movements;
- 13 appointments appear in Annex IV that do not appear in the staff movements published by HRM. Is this owing to the addition of recent appointment decisions? As mentioned above, such an addition could lead to double counting in the next report and should be avoided.

The establishment of a single, clear and easily accessible database would be useful to avoid such inconsistencies and produce accurate statistics. It is also essential, for the sake of transparency and to facilitate the correlation of information, that the data supplied by the Administration is not dispersed."

Employee engagement

16. We welcome the inclusion of all types of contracts in the employee engagement survey. However, the 50% response rate cannot be considered satisfactory, especially as it is down on the 2021 global survey, which achieved a 52% participation rate.

17. As mentioned above, we would like to express our astonishment at the unusual delay in publishing the results of the UNESCO Employee Engagement Survey, which was completed at the end of October 2024. Publication is scheduled for the first half of 2025. What justifies such a delay? The deferral can only limit the impact of the survey and postpone the implementation of the necessary remedial measures. There is also the question of possible data obsolescence at the time of publication. In a context of limited resources for HRM, it would be regrettable if this survey turned out to be a simple exercise with no follow-up, which would amount to a waste of resources. Instead of achieving the objective of “mobilizing employees”, this opacity actually reinforces staff mistrust, as evidenced by the unsatisfactory results visible in the Roadmap (Annex I).

18. We welcome the initiative of publishing results on a dedicated webpage, provided they are published in a complete, objective and transparent way. In any case, this should not be a substitute for sending an email to all colleagues informing them of the online publication of the survey results. Discreet communication risks being perceived as an attempt to downplay worrying results, which would only exacerbate the existing lack of trust.

Internships programme

19. This policy will now be implemented in two stages, and there is no apparent justification for this. The first phase, scheduled for 2025, remains unclear: are we talking about imminent application or one at the end of the year? Such inaccuracy is problematic and raises fears of further postponement. As for the second phase, which calls for the introduction of an allowance in January 2026, we are concerned about the guarantee of its financing. We assume that the necessary resources have been budgeted for in document 43 C/5, but is it not risky to bring forward implementation to 2026 when the budget has not yet been adopted? This uncertainty raises questions about the Administration’s ambition to implement this reform within the announced timeframe.

20. Moreover, the Administration states that “[t]he deployment of the first step was conducted with a focus on structured engagement and communication with onboarded interns, managers and implementor groups that have been equipped with detailed guidelines and training for a consistent implementation across the Organization. Engagement with the stakeholders was integral to this step to prepare for a full-scale implementation of the revised policy.” However, ISAU has been approached by Young UNESCO representatives who have expressed their disagreement with certain changes to the terms of the internship policy that were made after the announced date of its application in July 2024.² ISAU must emphasize that it is a staff association, and that it does not only represent permanent staff. Interns are not a separate category of people whose management falls outside our scope. We therefore ask to be consulted on any changes to this policy before it is published and implemented.

Aim 3 - Adapt for the Future

Supporting an agile and flexible Organization

21. We wonder about the persistent, unexplained delay in enacting the new parental leave policy, whose implementation was originally announced for 2023. With reference to the delays announced

² In its document 219 EX/5.III.A of February 2024, HRM declared that “[t]he new internship policy will apply from July 2024”.

for the implementation of the new internship policy, it would be advisable for HRM to respect its commitments regarding the deadlines for the publication and implementation of its policies.

22. We are concerned about the lack of concrete measures on flexible working arrangements. The Administration's document refers to a review of the policy, but no timetable is announced: "2025" remains a vague indication that guarantees nothing. We recall that the JIU report ([JIU/REP/2023/6](#)) on this subject dates back to 2023, and we fail to understand why a reform that simply consists of aligning with other United Nations system organizations should take so long. Let us not forget that UNESCO is the only United Nations system organization to prohibit telework away from the duty station, while others allow it for up to 90 days a year. Opposition in principle on such a subject is not rational, and should be replaced by a more pragmatic approach. We reiterate our earlier calls for greater flexibility, in particular by increasing the number of teleworking days, allowing telework away from the duty station and permitting compressed working hours. UNESCO claims to want to become more agile and flexible, but the lack of pragmatism and red tape run counter to this very objective. It is also essential to include staff associations in this review.

Improving performance and operations

23. We dispute the assertion that short-term appointments foster staff development. In reality, these contracts are grossly over-used, and often of long duration, with no real prospect of advancement, leading colleagues into a situation of prolonged insecurity. Although this measure looks convincing on paper, it has many unintended consequences due to a lack of effective regulation and transparency. The concept of short-term assignments should include non-renewal and return-to-origin clauses to guarantee the stability and security of staff members.

24. We understand the budgetary constraints, but a balanced approach that guarantees both organizational flexibility and the security of the staff concerned is essential. We are calling for clear measures to regulate the use of this type of contract, and to ensure that it remains the exception rather than a disguised substitute for long-term recruitment. We encourage the Administration to incorporate specific measures to regulate short-term assignments, ensuring that they are transparent and respectful of staff needs. Close coordination with the mobility policy is essential to ensure coherent and efficient human resources management, while promoting the professional development and satisfaction of staff members.

Aim 4 - Attain better results and impact

Staff well-being

25. ISAU fully supports the initiative to develop a staff mental health and well-being strategy based on the recommendations of the JIU (p. x-xi, [JIU/REP/2023/4](#)), and looks forward to working closely with the Administration in its preparation. However, in addition to long-term commitments, we are calling for the implementation of immediate, concrete measures that require little or no additional cost, in particular regarding flexible working arrangements and a reinforced fight against moral harassment. UNESCO should not wait for the finalization of a strategy before taking action.

26. In addition, the attention paid to preventative medicine and periodic medical examinations is a positive step forward, but it is also important that the medical service provide all useful information to colleagues concerning their rights, particularly in terms of long-term sick leave. Many colleagues have expressed their disappointment at the discontinuation of medical consultations with the doctor at Headquarters. We do not see how focusing on prevention campaigns prevents consultations, which help reduce absences and create a climate of trust contributing to good staff performance. We call for the reintroduction of these consultations so as not to deprive staff of practical and effective medical access.

27. Finally, the latest annual reports from IOS and the Ethics Office highlight a clear deterioration in the working climate within UNESCO, thus reinforcing the urgent need to adopt concrete measures

to improve staff well-being. As staff associations are not authorized to comment directly on Ethics Office documents, you will find our comments on the annual report of the Ethics Office and on the feasibility study on an independent ombudsperson's office in annex to this document.

Career development initiatives

28. We deem it more appropriate to refer to 360° evaluations under Aim 1 in the section on "Performance management". A number of questions remain unanswered: what are the precise process and modalities of this evaluation? Who selects the evaluators? Is it just an informal opinion with no consequences? In this respect, we welcome the ongoing IOS audit of the performance management system, and look forward to its findings and recommendations to clarify the persistent ambiguity surrounding 360° evaluation, currently presented by HRM as just "feedback". We also stress the importance of integrating 360° evaluation into the revised evaluation policy, to ensure that it is meaningful and effective.

29. A true 360° evaluation is one in which supervisors are assessed by their peers and subordinates. It must lead to concrete improvement measures in the event of underperformance, in order to reinforce the Organization's culture of responsibility and excellence. Data reported by the IOS Investigation Office and the Ethics Office, particularly on moral harassment, show the need for an evaluation that goes beyond mere personal development.

30. It is also crucial to establish a tangible link between performance appraisal and career advancement. The integration of mentoring, 360° evaluation and training is a step in the right direction, but without a mechanism to guarantee a direct impact on a transparent reward system, these efforts risk remaining superficial. We therefore expect to see concrete measures linking appraisals to career opportunities, in order to motivate staff and reward investment in skills development.

Draft 43 C/5 budget implications

31. We understand the budgetary uncertainty which is the Organization's lot, but we are concerned when HRM states that "a ZNG scenario would severely hamper the continuation and implementation of high-impact learning and development programmes as well as other flagship initiatives, including the full implementation of workforce planning principles, activities on mental health and well-being, disability inclusion and accessibility and, enhanced conditions of service for affiliate personnel, which risk being delayed or postponed should current resource levels be maintained." It is regrettable that there has been no consultation with staff associations on this subject. It would be appropriate for HRM to provide us with a timeline of its priorities so as to clarify the situation and ensure that key areas such as well-being, inclusion and workforce planning are prioritized.

32. Finally, it is important to stress that inaction has a cost. Litigation and appeals linked to poor human resources management practices represent a significant financial burden for UNESCO. Rather than waiting to be confronted with the consequences of its inertia, the Organization would benefit from investing in sound human resources policies, thus ensuring greater budgetary efficiency in the long term.

Proposed reporting adjustments

33. ISAU is well aware of the workload involved in producing reports. However, as staff are UNESCO's most precious resource, it is essential that both Member States and staff are kept informed of progress on the Human Resources Strategy, especially as its implementation is currently encountering many difficulties. In this context, it is imperative to reinforce transparency and ensure regular monitoring of the commitments made.

34. We understand that certain aspects, such as geographical distribution and gender balance, do not evolve significantly on a half-yearly basis and could be reported on less frequently, that is, only

at the autumn session when a detailed report is already scheduled. However, other elements require more frequent monitoring. Rather than a full report at each session, a summary update could be envisaged, highlighting progress and bottlenecks so that remedial action can be taken in a timely fashion. The aim must remain a balance between transparency and pragmatism: to guarantee relevant, usable monitoring, without unnecessarily multiplying administrative obligations.

Conclusion

35. We would like to express our concerns about the implementation of the Strategy, based on three major observations. Firstly, many targets have not been met on schedule. Secondly, budgetary uncertainty persists, complicating the planning and execution of initiatives. Finally, the instability at the head of the Bureau of Human Resources Management over many years has compromised any coherent, sustainable strategic vision. It is hard to guarantee clear, effective leadership when directors come and go. This instability seriously undermines the effectiveness of reforms and the implementation of commitments made. In order to ensure that the Organization and its staff are managed in a way that meets their needs, we strongly recommend that measures be taken to strengthen the stability of the Bureau of Human Resources Management, which is essential to guarantee the effective and sustainable implementation of the Strategy and to remedy the systemic problems we face. ISAU therefore calls on Member States to demand stable, consistent governance of the Bureau of Human Resources Management, with a clear mandate, strategic continuity and accountability for the objectives set.

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.