



United Nations

**Policies and platforms in support of
learning: towards more coherence,
coordination and convergence**

Report of the Joint Inspection Unit

Prepared by Petru Dumitriu



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*Executive summary***Policies and platforms in support of learning: towards more coherence, coordination and convergence**

As the main asset of the United Nations system is its staff, learning is an indispensable tool in improving quality and efficiency. Through learning, staff can develop new knowledge and skills, acquire new competencies and improve behaviours and attitudes. Learning is not optional; it is a sine qua non condition for the organizations and their staff to be able to adapt in a highly competitive and dynamic environment.

Moreover, the United Nations system cannot escape the transition to the future of work, which implies agility for organizations and continuous learning for individuals. According to recent studies, more than half of all employees in the world will require significant reskilling and upskilling in just the next three years. Such transformation can only be achieved by further learning.

For the United Nations system, learning can be also a transformative force that can break down silos, stimulate inter-agency cooperation, create synergies and increase efficiency in the use of resources, whether from regular budgets or voluntary contributions. Beyond the diversity of mandates and governance arrangements, the United Nations organizations are, after all, intergovernmental entities created and supported by the same Member States.

The main purpose of this review was to identify and recommend ways to optimize the intellectual capital represented by the staff of the United Nations, by means of learning.

Main findings and conclusions**The agreement that *learning is strategic* is not always substantiated by facts**

While there is general agreement on the principle that *learning is strategic* in the life of any organization, in particular for the organizations of the United Nations system, which are catalysts and brokers of knowledge, the allocation of resources does not reflect this principle. Already in 2003, the learning managers of the United Nations system proposed that 5 per cent of staff time and 2 per cent of staff costs should be devoted to learning, as an indicator that reflects its strategic importance. The Inspector found that few organizations meet those targets.

The Inspector also found that some organizations take a narrow approach to learning and talent management, one that does not form part of a broader strategy in support of organizational effectiveness and increased competitiveness. When in need of specific skills and competencies, many organizations are driven to implement ad hoc, short-term solutions at the expense of developing a holistic talent management system. As a result, the strategic dimension of employees' engagement, upskilling and reskilling is undervalued.

Creating a new culture of learning has to be more programmatic

The efficiency of the application of learning theories and methodologies is contingent on the introduction of a new culture, combining both cognitive and social dimensions. It would encompass the needs related to content and organizational context (recognition and reward, managerial and relational aspects), on the one hand, and the growing digital and networked infrastructure that facilitates access to learning resources and connecting tools, on the other.

A new culture of learning implies the understanding of a new reality, where learning also takes place beyond its traditional forms and can augment knowledge at all stages of an international civil servant's career. Meanwhile, the United Nations leaders are expected to showcase adaptability and continuous learning to keep the organizations relevant and agile in response to the changing demands. It is imperative that a new culture of learning and innovation should be developed, not just to keep up with new trends, but to maintain institutional relevance.

The meaning and the forms of learning are undergoing profound metamorphoses in all areas of interest for the United Nations. Innovative learning solutions may also help organizations to overcome their funding problems and better adapt to changing needs.

In the absence of continual efforts to promote a culture of learning, both in principle and in practice, staff performance may remain inertial and incapable of innovation.

A comprehensive and systematic perspective on inter-agency cooperation is missing

A new collaborative system-wide culture of learning is simultaneously made necessary and facilitated by two major driving factors: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the opportunities provided by innovative technologies for interactive and continuous learning.

The complexity of the 2030 Agenda means that the learners in the United Nations must be prepared to meet new challenges, create new partnerships or networks and apply new solutions. It is essential that learning policies start by identifying the types of knowledge needed from the organizational point of view and the new individual skills that staff should develop.

Yet, despite its emphatic holistic and collaborative call, as well as the interdisciplinary and crosscutting nature of its Goals, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda was not followed by a drive towards convergence or coordination of curricula. On the contrary, learning programmes on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proliferated with no visible concern for coherence, coordination or convergence. The fragmentation and uncoordinated nature of SDGs-related learning activities led to the opposite: a proliferation of courses and portals which may undermine the common vision of the United Nations and understanding of the role it is expected to play.

In the absence of a comprehensive and systematic perspective on inter-agency cooperation, the JIU team was not surprised to find conflicting views and lack of clarity as to which operational requirements are not sufficiently met at the system-wide level. Learning units are often requested to operate in silos and develop solutions in a reactive way; a system-wide representative and authoritative voice on learning is missing.

However, the report highlights some recent steps that point to an increasing awareness of the need for more inter-agency cooperation on learning, such as the on-going UNSDG:Learn initiative.

The use of opportunities brought by new technologies remains random and inconsistent

The importance of technology-based learning platforms emerged as a key issue for the review. New digital technologies can and should be another driving factor that facilitates and stimulates system-wide synergies and convergence, if learning policies and programmes are proactively and conscientiously coordinated.

The new technologies combine not only the necessary hardware and software, but also the intended learning processes and the interfaces among them. Technology-enabled trends and capabilities, such as the increase in remote interactions, mobility, portability and the use of a personal cloud storage system, require the adjustment of policies, curricula and institutional arrangements.

In the United Nations system, innovation in learning through the use of new technologies is not an abstract concept. The growing digital infrastructure amplifies the ability of United Nations organizations and their staff to access and use nearly unlimited knowledge resources. The same technologies offer unprecedented networking options, which should be unconditionally used for more coherence, coordination and convergence among the United Nations programmes, funds and specialized agencies at the system-wide level. The existing silos may have historical and bureaucratic justifications, but their continuation in the current digital era should no longer be tolerated, in particular in the area of learning.

In terms of data collection and analysis, the review was conducted before the eruption of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Attention to e-learning was thus already part of the vision of the future of learning projected by the report. Nevertheless, the importance of e-learning acquired a higher magnitude of importance during the almost universal lockdown. A by-product of the crisis was enhanced preparedness for, knowledge of and familiarity with e-learning practice across all hierarchical and professional horizons of United Nations staff, in the context of an unprecedented proliferation of e-learning solutions.

E-learning can be construed as a step towards agile United Nations organizations

The agile organization is a concept that describes a new balance between stability and dynamism. The prevailing traditional form of organization is static, siloed, with structural hierarchy, designed primarily for stability. The goals and decisions flow down the hierarchy. The structure is strong, but often rigid and slow-moving. We recognize in this description the prevailing profile of United Nations organizations at present.

In contrast, agile organizations act as networks of teams that operate in rapid learning and fast decision cycles. The main feature of an agile organization is the ability to reconfigure, quickly and efficiently, strategies, structures, processes, people and technology. Velocity and adaptability are added to stability, allowing adaptation to a volatile and uncertain environment.

The dynamics and the constant improvement and diversification of technology-supported learning solutions make them indispensable in any strategic vision on learning, whether at the individual or the organizational level. The ability of e-learning to reach a global audience and a widespread workforce is unparalleled and creates a learning environment conducive to agility. For the United Nations organizations, with such a wide geographical distribution, the design and delivery of learning programmes in e-learning format stimulate networking and capacity to optimize strategies and processes.

There is a need for more engagement and commitment by the staff themselves

The principle that learning is a responsibility shared by the Organization, its managers and each individual staff member is officially and widely recognized in the United Nations system. The report deals extensively with the duties of the organizations and the complex responsibilities of learning managers; the majority of recommendations are addressed to them. At the same time, the Inspector found that staff engagement is not satisfactory.

Two main reasons may account for limited staff engagement. The first is survey fatigue and the perception that feedback brings only a limited return in actual decision-making and learning priorities. The engagement of the staff appears equally low in terms of their participation in learning impact evaluations. The second reason is related to the lack of trust in the way that managers play their role in seeking, stimulating and rewarding staff engagement. The managers seem to pay lip service to learning, considering it the province of human resources officers. The JIU survey conducted for the purpose of the review, to which 9,564 staff members responded, confirmed the need for managers to improve objectivity and reduce circumstantial bias in the allocation of learning resources.

At the same time, the report also highlights the importance of personal initiatives and individual efforts of staff members in learning. While the responsibility of the organizations and managers is critical in creating an enabling environment for learning and talent development, it is also the duty of individual staff members to seek proactively to enrich their professional skills throughout their careers. Staff members should commit themselves to continuous learning, including by applying and sharing the skills gained from learning and development activities.

How to move towards a United Nations system of learning: three vectors

The Inspector identified three main vectors that could decisively drive the United Nations system towards more coherence, coordination and convergence, potentially bringing overall savings at system-wide level and more efficient spending of Member States' assessed or voluntary contributions.

The first vector is policy-related: the development of a visionary and strategic United Nations Organizational Learning Framework at system-wide level, which should encompass principles and actions built upon the common values and needs of all interested United Nations organizations. The Framework should be agreed upon and owned by all of them. That could trigger synergies, prevent duplication and waste of resources and assure a minimum level of inter-agency solidarity so that *no organization would be left behind*, however small and with however few resources for learning.

The second vector is institutional: the upgrading and consolidation of the role of the United Nations System Staff College as a system-wide knowledge management and learning institution, through the strengthening of its mandate and the enhancement of its resources.

The third vector is operational in nature: a coordinated, more rigorous, systematic and pragmatic use of e-learning platforms, including joint platforms. E-learning is no longer just a cheaper option or a simple alternative to face-to-face or blended courses. E-learning is the most feasible and realistic way to ensure constant transformation and adaptation of the entire workforce of the United Nations and to maintain the relevance, competency, competitiveness and efficiency of staff in the discharge of their duties.

* * *

The three parts of the present report cover, by and large, the scope and the main structure suggested by the title of the project, as do the 9 recommendations.

Part One refers to the current policies and programmes that describe the learning landscape in the United Nations system, and the existing needs and challenges, from strategic considerations to staff perception.

Under Part One, four recommendations are addressed to the executive heads of the United Nations organizations for action at the level of individual organizations. As the existing practices are very diverse, the recommendations should be implemented with flexibility, taking into account the specific needs and means of the organization concerned.

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should establish a minimum set of key performance indicators and associated targets for the efficiency of learning programmes and their effectiveness in support of business outcomes, which the organizations should monitor and report upon to the governing bodies.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should integrate the evaluation findings on learning into the learning management systems and use them effectively to inform decision-making processes on future learning activities.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, in consultation with the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, examine the existing options for a comprehensive joint curriculum or at least system-wide quality assurance of courses related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, by the end of 2021.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of United Nations organizations should take the actions they deem appropriate to better integrate staff learning plans into their respective performance assessments and to ensure that managers are also held accountable for implementation.

Part Two offers the first attempt ever made at system-wide level to analyse the technological tools, platforms and learning management systems used by the United Nations organizations in support of learning. It contains soft recommendations addressed to human resources units and learning managers.

Part Three provides a comprehensive analysis and a package of solutions conducive to more coherence, coordination and convergence at system-wide level. It contains one recommendation addressed to the Director General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, two to the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, one to the governing bodies and one to the Economic and Social Council.

Recommendation 5

The Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization should, in coordination with the executive heads of all interested organizations in the United

Nations system, in particular the United Nations System Staff College, establish and maintain a comprehensive catalogue of open learning resources that are relevant for individual organizations and for cross-cutting learning needs, in particular those related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should establish criteria for the more systematic use of external platforms, based on judicious curating of their courses and realistic learning objectives.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, through inter-agency agreements, recognize relevant learning programmes followed on external platforms, for which appropriate credentials are presented, and reflect that recognition in the learning management systems.

Recommendation 8

The governing bodies of United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2023, approve a common United Nations Organizational Learning Framework, agreed through relevant inter-agency mechanisms, which should contain a set of principles and a plan of action for gradual implementation.

Recommendation 9

The Economic and Social Council should examine the possibility of revising the current mandate of the United Nations System Staff College, by the end of 2022, from both an operational and a financial perspective, in order to strengthen the College's role as a central learning hub of the United Nations system.

* * *

The report also contains **17 soft recommendations**.

At a strategic level, the executive heads are invited to consider:

- Making better use of learning resources available at local level, taking into account all working languages (para. 66)
- Establishing a minimum set of criteria/principles for the definition of academies of the United Nations organizations (para. 87)
- Taking a more strategic, impact-oriented and socially-aware approach to learning, including through the coordination of learning operations at organizational and system-wide level, adapted to the specific operational requirements of the organization concerned (para. 142)
- Establishing measures to systematically use 360° appraisals to evaluate the strategic alignment and priority setting in learning, with a focus on results (para. 142)
- Ensuring systematic, continuous and collaborative staff engagement in priority setting, learning-needs assessment and learning delivery (para. 203)
- Establishing a roster of United Nations external instructors for knowledge-sharing and peer-learning purposes and institutionalizing channels of communication among them (para. 142)

At the policy level, the learning managers are invited to take the following actions:

- Make better use of internal resources available on performance data to effectively capture the learning footprint of staff and readjust learning priorities (para. 122)
- Experiment, on a voluntary basis, with a system of provisional certification, prior to final certification, in order to ensure a minimum level of impact evaluation and keep learners motivated to participate in the evaluation (para. 119)
- Consider the use of system-wide funding schemes that could realize economies of scale for the further development of system-wide learning programmes and the inclusion of organizations with fewer resources (para. 194)
- Commit to the scrupulous application of distributive, procedural, interactional and sustainable fairness in the allocation of resources allotted to learning (para. 231)
- Stimulate, recognize and reward the personal motivation of the staff to engage in learning (para. 232)
- Elaborate, use and disseminate guides and toolkits on the use of external e-learning platforms and innovative learning technologies, which may include a common space for long-term agreements related to learning (para. 355)

The other set of recommendations, addressed to learning managers, aims to optimize the use of learning platforms:

- Use as a criterion for the selection of both enterprise resource planning tools and learning management systems their ability to integrate well and exchange data on learning activities, including on impact evaluation (para. 269)
- Require cloud-based vendors to provide access to comprehensive analytics of the data generated by learners during the learning activity (para. 295)
- Reduce, where appropriate, the number of different internal learning platforms and serve both internal and external audiences with the same learning management systems (para. 302)
- In future decisions on the choice of learning management system, favour those platforms that allow, inter alia, more interaction and collaboration, within and outside the organization (para. 306)
- Experiment with a United Nations system common portable digital certification system, by making efficient use of open standards and resources or in partnership with learning service providers (para. 365)

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Acronyms

CEB	United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination
DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
DGACM	Department for General Assembly and Conference Management
DPO	United Nations Department of Peace Operations
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
ESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GLDC	Global Learning and Development Centre (UNHCR)
HLCM	High-Level Committee on Management (CEB)
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMO	International Maritime Organization
ITC	International Trade Centre
ITC-ILO	International Training Centre of the International Labor Organization
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
JIU	Joint Inspection Unit of the United Nations System
LMF	Learning Managers Forum
LMS	Learning Management System(s)
LNA	Learning Needs Assessment
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OER	Open Educational Resources
OHR/DMSPC	United Nations Office of Human Resources in the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance
OICT	United Nations Office of Information and Communications Technology
SCORM	Shareable Content Object Reference Model
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDSS	United Nations Department for Safety and Security

UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOG	United Nations Office at Geneva
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNOV	United Nations Office in Vienna
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNSSC	United Nations System Staff College
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization
UPU	Universal Postal Union
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

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1. Introduction

1.1. Conceptual premises

1. The Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) of the United Nations system included a review of “Policies, programmes and platforms in support of learning” in its programme of work for 2019.

2. The initial proposal came from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), which suggested a system-wide review of existing learning practices in the United Nations system and an assessment of, inter alia, the extent to which various learning systems can facilitate more efficient contributions by the United Nations system in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, provide easy access for staff to learning solutions and avoid duplication, incoherence and waste of resources.

3. In the overall context of the recent work by JIU on knowledge production, sharing and assimilation, clarification of the concept of learning was a prerequisite. One of the simplest dictionary definitions of learning is “the acquisition of knowledge or skills through study, experience or being taught”.¹ In its report on knowledge management in the United Nations system,² JIU reviewed the knowledge acquired by staff through their working experience and practice in their respective organizations (experience), while its report on policy research uptake³ examined the issue of the knowledge produced by research, analysis, synthesis and uptake in decision-making (study). In accordance with its terms of reference, the review on learning addressed the third available way for staff members to acquire knowledge, as individuals, through lifelong learning. The review took into account, as a primary premise, the fact that training, in its traditional meaning (taught by someone), is only one of the many options that describe the learning environment nowadays. Non-training learning solutions were also considered during the review.

4. In their research design, the review used, as a practical guide, the broadest sense of learning and development as defined in the Secretary-General’s bulletin on learning and development policy:⁴

- (a) Participation in self-study programmes, including e-learning and other computer-based programmes;
- (b) Group activities and participation in communities of practices and occupational/functional networks;
- (c) One-to-one learning including counselling, coaching, mentoring and knowledge sharing;
- (d) Experiential learning such as on-the-job training, assignments, team projects and task-based training.

5. Another conceptual premise is that the current policies should be based on the principle that learning is a responsibility shared by the Organization, its managers and each individual staff member.⁵ While the organizations have a critical responsibility to create an enabling environment for learning and talent development, it is also the duty of individual staff members to proactively seek to enrich their professional skills throughout their careers. Staff members should commit themselves to continuous learning, including by applying and sharing the skills gained from learning and development activities.

6. The learning management system is a key concept used throughout the review. By and large, it is defined as a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking and delivery of and reporting on educational courses, training programmes and learning and development programmes.

7. As in other areas that need innovation, a new culture of learning is necessary in the United Nations system. Learning combines both cognitive and social dimensions, encompassing needs related to content and organizational context (recognition and reward, managerial and relational aspects), on the one hand, and the

¹ Oxford Living Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/learning>.

² Knowledge management in the United Nations system, JIU/REP/2016/10.

³ Strengthening policy research uptake in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, JIU/REP/2018/7.

⁴ United Nations, Secretariat, Secretary-General’s Bulletin, Learning and Development Policy, 22 June 2009, doc. ST/SGB/2009/9.

⁵ Ibid.

growing digital and networked infrastructure that expands access to learning resources and connecting tools, on the other.

8. A new culture of learning implies the understanding of a new reality where learning takes place outside traditional forms⁶ and can augment knowledge and good judgment at all stages of international civil servants' careers. Meanwhile, United Nations leaders are expected to showcase "adaptability and continuous learning"⁷ to maintain organizational relevance and agility in response to changing demands.

9. Moreover, the United Nations system cannot escape the transition to the future of work, which implies agility for organizations and continuous learning for individuals. According to a recent report,⁸ more than half of all employees will require significant reskilling and upskilling in just three years. This can only be achieved by further learning.

10. A new collaborative system-wide culture of learning is simultaneously made necessary and facilitated by two major driving factors: (a) the holistic, participatory and inclusive nature of the 2030 Agenda and the needs arising from it; and (b) the opportunities provided by innovative technologies for interactive and continuous learning.

11. The complexity of the 2030 Agenda means that learners in the United Nations system must be prepared to meet new challenges, create new partnerships or networks and apply new solutions. It is essential that learning policies start by identifying what types of knowledge are needed from the organizational point of view and which new individual skills should be developed by staff.

12. The importance of technology-based learning platforms emerged as a key issue in the review. On the one hand, there is the potential of new technologies to allow and stimulate system-wide synergies and convergence, if the learning policies and programmes are proactively and conscientiously coordinated. On the other hand, those technologies may inhibit inter-agency cooperation if they are developed in silos.

13. The new technologies combine not only the necessary hardware and software, but also the intended learning processes and the interfaces among them. Technology-enabled trends and capabilities, such as the increase in remote interactions, mobility, portability and the use of a personal cloud storage system, require the adjustment of policies, curricula and institutional arrangements. While the values of the United Nations remain the same over time, adaptation to technology-based solutions implies changes in the behaviour of staff members and senior managers, based on constant learning.

1.2. Objectives and scope

14. The main objectives of the review were to:

- (a) Analyse the current status of policies and platforms supporting learning in the United Nations system and identify the potential for more coherence, coordination and convergence;
- (b) Assess the extent to which inter-agency and system-wide collaboration is aligned with the needs arising from the 2030 Agenda and other strategic goals;
- (c) Analyse the specific roles of various providers of learning services used in the United Nations system internally and externally;
- (d) Examine the potential brought by e-learning platforms and other technology-based forms of learning for increased inter-agency coordination and collaboration.

15. The review was system-wide in scope and included the United Nations System Staff College, as an autonomous institution mandated to provide training services for staff.

16. The review did not examine organizational learning, defined as the process of creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge within an organization, other than as the overall context in which staff learning is conducted and a beneficial impact expected.

⁶ Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, *A New Culture of Learning, Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011).

⁷ United Nations system leadership framework (CEB/2018/1, annex).

⁸ World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report 2018*.

17. The review does not include language-learning programmes, which exist since the establishment of the United Nations. Language learning is planned at system-wide level and has its own specific learning outcomes, methods and tools and approach to cost recovery. The learning environment that is specific to troops and other participants in peacekeeping operations was not part of the scope of the review, either.

1.3. Methodology

18. The review was conducted from May 2019 to February 2020, on a United Nations system-wide basis. In addition to the 28 JIU participating organizations, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations System Staff College and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) also participated in the review. Various departments and offices of the United Nations Secretariat⁹ and all the five regional economic commissions sent their individual input. The International Training Centre of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Global Learning and Development Centre of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provided particularly comprehensive contributions. The United Nations System Staff College responded to a specific individual questionnaire.

19. The Inspector also benefited from the valuable assistance of the Geneva learning managers network, which convened a preliminary brainstorming session in April 2019, and from participating in the Learning Managers Forum,¹⁰ organized by the United Nations System Staff College, with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Secretariat, in June 2019.

20. In accordance with the JIU internal standards, guidelines and working procedures, the system-wide review was conducted in a consultative manner with all the participating organizations. The methodology included a mixed-methods approach consisting of: an extensive desk review; in-depth policy analysis of learning policies and platforms as submitted by the participating organizations; a quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from the documentation received and collected, including questionnaire responses, interview notes and the results of a global staff survey on learning policies and practices; and the triangulation and validation of the information obtained.

21. The documentation phase included an in-depth desk review of key policies/strategies, previous JIU reports, reports of other oversight bodies and independent evaluations, procedures and programme-related documents related to learning. Over 35 evaluation reports on training programmes – submitted by the participating organizations – were analysed (meta-evaluation and synthesis) in order to solicit relevant findings, conclusions and recommendations.

22. JIU convened and co-organized two round tables on e-learning with participation from academia and other major digital e-learning platforms, in partnership with the World Association for Sustainable Development and the Geneva Learning Network, in June and December 2019 respectively. The experts shared with the United Nations participants their own insights and critical analysis, as well as reflections about the future of e-learning, based on practical presentations of current and potential uses of e-learning platforms. The deliberations helped the team to identify and prioritize the main issues relevant for the purpose of the review.

23. Data were collected from various sources through document review, key informant interviews, field visits and focus group discussions, including with external providers of e-learning services (LinkedIn, Open University, Claned, Wikimedia, Coopacademy, the Centre for Continuing and Distance Education of the University of Geneva and the Centre for Learning Sciences and the Swiss EdTech Collider at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne) and other international organizations (the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the European Commission, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the International Secretariat of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization).

⁹ Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Office of Information and Communications Technology, Office of Human Resources in the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, United Nations Office at Vienna, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and United Nations Office at Geneva.

¹⁰ The Learning Managers Forum is an annual meeting of officials responsible for managing staff development and learning functions in the United Nations system. The series of meeting started in 1997 and is coordinated by the United Nations System Staff College.

24. It is worth noting that the data were collected in 2019 and were based on statistics or estimations available for 2016-2018. Current data might have changed abruptly in the specific circumstances of telecommuting, imposed by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis.

25. A system-wide global staff survey was conducted in January and February 2020 in order to capture staff perceptions and views on learning needs and opportunities, as well as on new skills to be acquired or developed through learning. Responses were received from 9,564 staff members from all the participating organizations. The survey contained one open-ended question and responses were analysed with the help of R, an open source analytical tool for data mining.

26. During the review, the Inspector personally took 25 courses in various formats: face-to-face courses organized by United Nations entities (the United Nations System Staff College and the Centre for Learning and Multilingualism of the United Nations Office at Geneva), online learning solutions made available by participating organizations (LinkedIn Learning made available by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – and Agora from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)) and several massive open online courses on Coursera and edX. The Inspector’s direct participation in courses available on the main platforms used in the United Nations system facilitated the development of a comparative perspective on the main features of those platforms, in particular: interaction between learners and lecturers and among learners, availability of technical assistance, use of multimedia, duration and testing and examining methods.

27. Comments from on the draft report have been sought from the participating organizations and taken into account in finalizing the report. In accordance with article 11.2 of the JIU statute, the present report has been finalized after consultation among the Inspectors so as to test its conclusions and recommendations against the collective wisdom of the Unit.

28. The report contains nine recommendations, of which seven are addressed to the executive heads of United Nations system organizations and two to legislative bodies. To facilitate the handling of the report, the implementation of its recommendations and the monitoring thereof, the annex contains a table identifying the recommendations relevant to each organization and specifying whether they are directed to the legislative or governing body or the organization’s executive head. The report also contains 17 soft recommendations addressed to executive heads and learning managers.

29. The sources of the information collected and analysed have an important bearing on the relevance of such a review. The JIU review team did its utmost to contact a wide range of officials responsible for learning, from human resources staff to members of operational units, and individuals from various professional horizons (academics, evaluators, e-learning curators and platform administrators, etc.). The JIU survey was sent to all interested individuals, regular staff and managers, professionals and general staff at headquarters, regional and field levels. Nevertheless, JIU has limited options as to the choice of the United Nations officials designated by each participating organization to provide data and documentation. The Inspector expresses appreciation to all who assisted in the preparation of this report, and particularly to those who participated in interviews, responded to questionnaires and so generously shared their knowledge and expertise for the purposes of this review.

Part One

Current learning landscape: needs and challenges

2. Policies and practices

2.1. Policy framework

30. The learning policies of the United Nations system originate in the conditions set out in Article 101 of the Charter of the United Nations, which stipulates that “the paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity”. The setting in which learning activities are designed, programmed and assessed against those standards has evolved significantly. Yet, learning has not necessarily received the attention it deserves.

31. In terms of policy guidance, the Secretary-General’s bulletin on learning and development policy sets out the fundamental principles and objectives of learning priorities across the system.¹¹ However, operational requirements within organizations vary significantly, as do their learning priorities and programmes. Most of the organizations – the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Food Programme (WFP), UNDP, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), UNFPA, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), WFP, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) – have their own learning strategies and policies.

32. Differences in mandates, governance, stakeholders, organizational culture and learning maturity add to this complexity. Among the common policy denominators defining learning priorities mentioned in the bulletin, there are principles related to: (a) maintaining the professional and managerial competence of staff; (b) considering learning as a responsibility shared by the organization, its managers and each individual staff member; (c) ensuring universal access to learning for staff at all levels, regardless of their location or source of funding; and (d) encouraging staff members to demonstrate an active commitment to continuous learning, including by applying and sharing the skills gained from learning and development activities.¹²

33. The premise underpinning the review was that learning needs to be effective, efficient and purposeful in serving organizational mandates, in order to attract, retain, motivate and develop a flexible and agile workforce, while creating a positive work environment.¹³ The Secretary-General’s circular on learning and development policy serves as guidance for many other participating organizations. In the Human Resources Management Framework for the United Nations common system, adopted by the International Civil Service Commission in 2000, it was recognized that appropriate learning and development opportunities for staff and management could also be provided through inter-agency arrangements. Those premises should in principle facilitate a coherent approach towards learning policies at the system-wide level, without impinging upon the specific content needs of individual organizations.

34. However, the review did not identify a designated system-wide coordinating mechanism to address learning issues at senior management level. The High-Level Committee on Management of the Committee of the Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) and its Human Resources Network have addressed issues of training and coaching on a number of occasions (most recently related to programmes supporting gender equality at senior management level and leadership programmes) as part of broader discussions on

¹¹ ST/SGB/2009/9. Other documents on learning priorities include the administrative instruction on the upgrading of substantive and technical skills (ST/AI/2010/10); the Secretary-General’s bulletin on performance management and development learning programme for managers and supervisors (ST/SGB/2011/5); the administrative instruction on language proficiency and language allowance (ST/AI/2016/9); and the Secretary-General’s bulletin on the United Nations mandatory learning programme (ST/SGB/2018/4).

¹² ST/SGB/2009/9, op.cit.

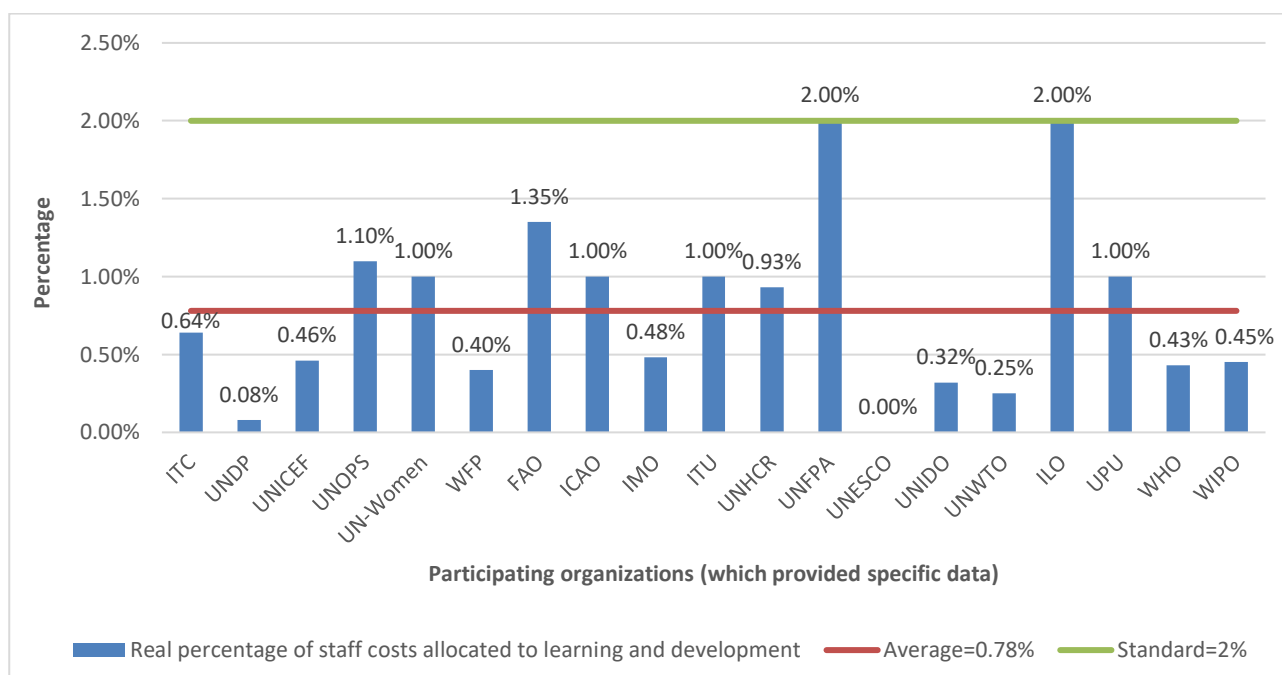
¹³ Ibid.

performance management. A strategic vision for the learning landscape in the United Nations system has not featured on the agenda of CEB in practice since 2003.

2.2. Resources

35. The first and most meaningful observation that should be highlighted is that, despite general agreement on the principle that learning is strategic in the life of any organization, particularly the United Nations system organizations, which are catalysts and brokers of knowledge, the allocation of resources does not follow this principle. In 2003, in a landmark organizational learning framework presented by the United Nations system learning managers to the Human Resources Network of the CEB High-Level Committee on Management, it was proposed that 5 per cent of staff time and 2 per cent of staff costs should be devoted to learning, as an indicator that was meant to reflect the strategic importance of learning.¹⁴

Figure 1 – Percentage of staff costs allocated to learning and development



36. In reality, learning has evolved against a background of continually reduced budgets and other constraints. As shown in figure 1, most of the organizations spend less than 1 per cent of their staff costs on training, with the average figure for learning and development across the United Nations system estimated currently at 0.71 per cent. Only two organizations achieve the 2 per cent benchmark. Resources allocated to learning are always on the primary list of candidates for cuts in times of financial crisis. The review found that, generally, much more attention is devoted – especially by governing boards – to nominal savings than to qualitative improvements. It appears that nearly half of all staff followed fewer than three learning activities and only 53 per cent were offered the suggested five days allocated for training over the past two years (see chapter 4).

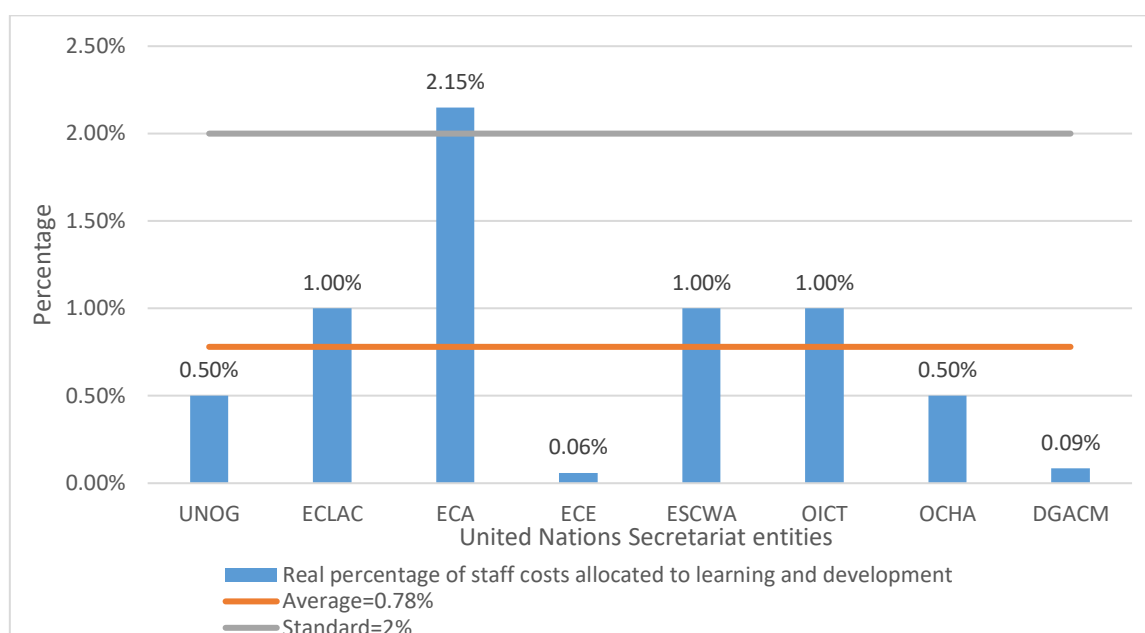
37. The most telling example is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), whose learning segment of the regular budget dropped from approximately \$5 million to zero following budget cuts at the end of 2011 and has not fully recovered since. Certainly, this was an exceptional situation and the Inspector noted that UNESCO does assure a minimum level of learning services. Overall, the insufficiency of earmarked learning resources remains a challenge for a majority of United Nations organizations.

¹⁴ CEB, HLCM HR Network, doc. CEB/2003/HLCM/17 of 2 July 2003.

38. The absence of a system-wide vision of the strategic importance of staff learning is also illustrated by the broad variation in learning expenditure – from 0.06 per cent to 2.15 per cent of staff costs – in several units of the United Nations Secretariat for which data was made available.

39. Arguably, the financial dimensions of the efficiency opportunities are indeed critical in assessing learning services. While not desirable, albeit understandable, the financial pressure on the regular budgets will remain a reality for organizations in the United Nations system for the years to come. It would be more perilous to allow the financial constraints to distort the understanding of and the importance accorded to learning. Views such as that “general training of the United Nations staff is not a purpose of development cooperation”, as recorded in a study conducted by the United Nations System Staff College in 2005,¹⁵ are a flagrant incongruity, given the role that the system is expected to play in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Figure 2 – Percentage of staff costs allocated to learning and development – United Nations Secretariat



40. Against this background, the Inspector notes that, while the allocation of resources to learning should reflect an organizational commitment to a more strategic approach, it is equally useful not to overstate the importance of the volume of financial resources per se as a key driver for effective learning solutions. Some interviewees realistically observed that the availability of more financial resources may have the undesirable effect of increasing the number of training activities of low quality or encouraging overspending on human resources. Other factors, such as improved quality and relevance of learning activities, a coordinated focus, the strategic alignment of learning with corporate priorities, specialization and an enhanced focus on mandates through a flexible and well-equipped workforce, are also essential.

Box 1 – Revisiting theoretical myths (1): the 70:20:10 model

One of the most cited and influential mantras in learning is the 70:20:10 model. The figures resulted from the interpretation of a survey of 191 “successful executives” conducted in the late 1980s. The model suggests that 70 per cent of learning is acquired from jobs, 20 per cent from people and 10 per cent from courses and reading.

Unfortunately, the excessive use of this bite-sized catchphrase by learning managers may lead to its meaning being overestimated and, more often than not, to misunderstanding and negative judgment of the value of organized, structured, curriculum- and objectives-based learning.

¹⁵ CEB, HLCM, Eleventh session, The Development of a Core Curriculum for the United Nations System Staff College, doc. CEB/2006/HLCM/R.3.

The Inspector recognizes that continuous learning takes place through a combination of forms. However, the 70:20:10 model has no scientific value and no empirical data sustaining it. Its origin is uncertain¹⁶ and there are doubts about the statistical relevance of the survey that gave rise to it.

The survey was undertaken with 191 executives who were asked to indicate three events that had made the difference in their careers and the lessons they learned from them. Eight years later, the responses were re-interpreted, clustered and translated into figures (perfect multiples of “tens”, an eye-catching artifice). Yet, they summarized the findings as “lessons learned”, not as “principles” of learning.

Quantitatively, the number of 191 respondents is not statistically relevant enough to justify a dogma with world-wide influence. Nor is the survey relevant in terms of quality: the respondents were chief executives only. The survey also has inbuilt bias, as the respondents were naturally inclined to explain their “success” by their individual “capacity” to learn from the job. The responses are just subjective impressions and retrospective contemplations of personal careers, not facts or recipes for how to develop staff.

41. The Inspector fully agrees that employees are continuously learning, by observing and by making and addressing mistakes. It is also true that performance is improved by the interaction between the individuals (with their own capacity and motivation) and the working environment (including experience and on-the-job training). However, continuous learning is rooted in the “x” per cent of organized and structured learning. Interaction with other people and on-the-job observation are not enough in any profession, unless they are underpinned by a systematic and structured way of learning.

42. Nevertheless, as the 70:20:10 model is mentioned by some United Nations interlocutors out of its context, caution is needed, as it may exert undue influence. The model, based on a very narrow sample of respondents, should not be extrapolated to the diversity of learning needs and the high variety of mandates in the United Nations system. The meaning of the 70:20:10 model should be interpreted with care when construing learning strategies and policies and allotting resources. It is structured learning that fertilizes and catalyses the other forms of learning suggested by the model.

43. While re-emphasizing the need for adequate resources, the Inspector notes that innovative solutions may help organizations to overcome their funding problems and to create new synergies and better adapt to the changing needs. The meaning and the forms of learning are undergoing profound metamorphoses in all areas of interest to the United Nations. A new culture of learning and innovation is an imperative, not just to keep up with new trends, but as a matter of institutional relevance.

44. In the United Nations system, innovation in learning solutions – as a means to achieve more efficiency and adequacy – is not an abstract concept. In the view of the Inspector, innovative ways of learning are linked with two key factors. The first one, available to learners and societies in general, is the better use of the new technologies. Indeed, the growing digital infrastructure amplifies the ability of United Nations organizations and their staff to access and use nearly unlimited knowledge resources.

45. The second factor is particularly relevant for the United Nations system. Those same technologies offer unprecedented networking options, which should be used unconditionally to achieve more coherence, coordination and convergence among the United Nations programmes, funds and specialized agencies at the system-wide level. The existing silos may have historical and bureaucratic justifications, but the continuation of many of them in the current digital era and in view of the holistic imperatives of the 2030 Agenda should no longer be accepted.

46. The review was not intended to provide an estimated exact figure for savings that could be derived from better inter-agency cooperation on learning platforms, content development and learning solutions. The challenges identified by the review team include: heterogeneity in the modalities for tracking learning costs (internally or externally oriented, capacity building or technical, budgetary autonomy, etc.) and thereby the absence of comparable data among organizations on the resources dedicated to these services.

¹⁶ The survey was first reported in: Morgan McCall, Michael Lombardo and Ann Morrison, *Lessons of Experience. How Successful Executives Develop on the Job* (The Free Press, Simon and Schuster, 1988). The 70:20:10 formula was not construed from percentages calculated at that time and the model was not expressed as such in the book. It was eight years later that the findings of the survey were summarized in percentages in: *Career Architect Development Planner* by Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger (Lominger Press, 1996).

47. Lacking a comprehensive and systematic perspective on inter-agency cooperation, the team was not surprised to find conflicting views and a lack of clarity as to which operational requirements are not sufficiently met at a system-wide level. Learning units are often requested to operate in silos and develop in a reactive way; there is no system-wide representative and authoritative voice on learning. Nevertheless, some ways of working towards convergent actions are proposed (see chapter 6) as a way of meeting contemporary challenges, including by counter-balancing a possible decline in financial resources.

48. Efforts aimed at producing cost-effective solutions for learning should also include a more radical shift in the paradigm, primarily through funding for the development and use of internal resources. Too often, the organizations may prefer to stay in their comfort zone and call in external providers, instead of trying to invest in internal talents and expertise. Investing in internal resources is more sustainable and stimulating in the long term. For example, no external providers can produce better learning content specific to operational mandates than the experienced practitioners within the respective organizations.

49. In addition to encouraging better use of e-learning platforms, individually and at a system-wide level, more judicious management of learning content can achieve more efficiency in the use of scarce resources. What the staff of the United Nations system need from learning units is assistance and direction in navigating the wide variety of courses and learning solutions. Learning managers can thus “become content curators who judiciously select and promote the best ‘artefacts’ for learning”¹⁷ and in turn assist staff in acquiring the skills necessary to review and evaluate various learning sources and be able to identify what is relevant, accurate and reliable, in line with organizational priorities.

50. A realignment of the role of learning units from content experts to content curators also puts content itself into a new perspective; rather than developing content, learning managers should carefully use selected resources to help staff develop, strengthen and assess the skills needed to perform their functions. Experience and content continue to be important, but it is essential that the conditions be created to make the overall environment more conducive to professional development. The abundance of courses, platforms and learning formats is not an assurance of relevance and efficiency. The learning content and instructional design must also be subject to careful selection.

51. The implementation of the following recommendation will improve the existing means of assessing the efficiency of learning programmes.

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should establish a minimum set of key performance indicators and associated targets for the efficiency of learning programmes and their effectiveness in support of business outcomes, which the organizations should monitor and report on to the governing bodies.

2.3. Learning formats

Building learning maturity: work in progress

52. As the present report is the first attempt to venture into the uncharted waters of learning in the United Nations system, the Inspector believes that it would have been premature to recommend specific learning maturity models, despite the proliferation of many such theoretical models (for example, the Organizational Learning Maturity Scale,¹⁸ the Learning Business Maturity Model,¹⁹ the 3i Learning Services Maturity Model²⁰ and the E-Learning Maturity Model²¹).

¹⁷ Interview with learning provider for the United Nations system, Geneva, November 2019.

¹⁸ Stephen J. Gill and David Grebow, “Minds at Work: Managing for Success in the Knowledge Economy” (Alexandria, VA, Association for Talent Development, 2017).

¹⁹ Jeff Cobb and Celisa Steele, “The Learning Business Maturity Model”, TAGORAS, 2016. Available at <https://www.tagoras.com/maturity-model/>.

²⁰ Amitabh S. Sinha, “The 3i Learning Services Maturity Model”, Training, 3 August 2015. Available at <https://trainingmag.com/3i-learning-services-maturity-model/>.

²¹ Stephen Marshall, “The E-Learning Maturity Model”, Victoria University of Wellington. Available at <http://e-learning.geek.nz/emm/>.

53. The heterogeneity of learning practices, the ad hoc nature of learning programmes and the lack of evidence of a systematic approach in learning policies were only some of the challenges that JIU faced in outlining possible system-wide benchmarks of learning maturity.

54. The review therefore was based on a soft concept of maturity that included: (i) a clear vision of learning needs and related accountability; (ii) an articulated learning strategy mainstreamed throughout other organizational strategies; (iii) the availability of sufficient capacity to implement learning strategies; (iv) the use of effective methodologies to assess learning needs and the impact of learning activities; and (v) a stimulating learning environment.

55. The learning landscape of United Nations system organizations is heterogeneous. This heterogeneity – inherent to organizations with different levels of internal capacities and resources – is compounded by programmatic and operational requirements that vary markedly. Some organizations are heavily knowledge-based and capacity building-oriented, while others fulfil operational functions with a significant field footprint.

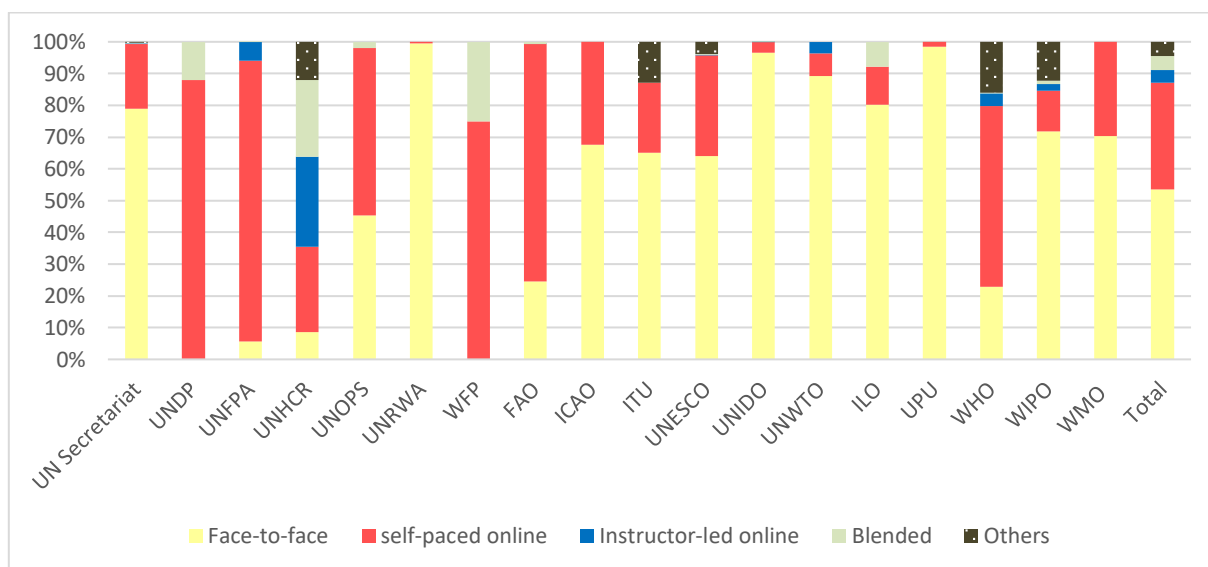
56. Even within the same organization, not all parts necessarily move at the same pace or take the same path towards learning maturity. In addition, the learning processes may fluctuate between levels for a multitude of reasons related to resources, management, conflicting priorities, timing, etc.

57. While it is beyond the scope of the present review to offer system-wide benchmarks, the Inspector noted with interest that, in general, organizations with some form of self-assessment and awareness (UNHCR, ILO, United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), UNICEF, UNDP) were better able to identify problematic areas and act upon strengths and weaknesses. This finding confirms that organizations that practise a continuous learning mindset, assessing and openly discussing challenges, are more effective and “have up to four times better retention than those that do not”.²² While maturity levels should not be treated in absolute terms, they do give leaders a sense of where their organizations stand with respect to learning and what they need to do to build a seamless culture in which work and learning are efficiently intertwined.

Learning landscape: a mixed picture

58. The assessment of instructional approaches, as submitted by the participating organizations, resulted in the following findings:

Figure 3 – Weight of instructional formats by number of staff trained²³



Source: Responses to JIU questionnaire.

²² Josh Bersin, “A new paradigm for corporate training: learning in the flow of work,” Josh Bersin Academy, 3 July 2018. Available at <https://joshbersin.com/2018/06/a-new-paradigm-for-corporate-training-learning-in-the-flow-of-work/>.

²³ The methods used by participating organizations to record courses vary and the resulting figures may not be entirely comparable. For example, WFP conducts face-to-face training sessions locally in addition to other non-recurring face-to-face events, which may not necessarily be reflected as such in the central platform.

Face-to-face, online and blended learning

59. Most organizations in the United Nations system still rely primarily on face-to-face learning, which accounts for more than half of staff training. Self-paced online learning was the next most popular method at the time of the review. Admittedly, there is a significant variation among organizations in terms of the dominant instructional approach. For instance, learning activities in UNRWA and UNIDO are almost entirely in face-to-face format, while UNDP, UNFPA and WFP indicate a strong preference for the self-paced online format.

60. Beyond the current practice, the cost/benefit ratio increasingly favours the ascendance of e-learning as more efficient and widely available. Interviews with learning professionals and trainers indicated that learning modality preferences are often related to demographic factors, with younger staff showing stronger interest in online and blended learning approaches. Among the benefits quoted were: more engaging multimedia content, flexible schedule, possibility to learn at one's own pace, unlimited access to the instructor and classmates' material through forums and the course database. A deeper analysis of the opportunities brought by e-learning will be offered in chapter 5.

61. Blended courses offer an interesting mix of specific pedagogical, cost and language considerations, particularly where local resources are used. In principle, blended courses can combine the pedagogical value of direct interaction among learners and trained teachers with the degree of flexibility and ubiquity of self-paced online courses.

62. For example, UNOPS transformed a one-week face-to-face workshop into the seven-month blended internal leadership development programme "Leading People at UNOPS". A programme spanning over several months was considered necessary to allow participants to engage in the hands-on application of leadership concepts and tools. A cohort-based structure was used to sustain motivation, with the formation of a support network of personal connections. The application process replaced a nomination process and required participants to demonstrate their own initiative and interest.

63. The WHO Regional Committee for Africa runs "Leading pathways for leadership" as a comprehensive blended programme. It combines self-paced learning, face-to-face workshops, virtual classes, coaching and action-oriented projects that embed learning in the workplace. However, the costs may remain high and inhibiting, due to the travel and other associated expenses of both learners and teachers.

64. In an attempt to overcome the face-to-face versus online dilemma, blended courses can indeed be less expensive when learners and trained teachers are in the same location. Blended solutions may not be applicable everywhere in the United Nations system. However, in the United Nations Offices at New York, Geneva and Vienna and other duty stations that have large numbers of staff and host several organizations, blended courses may make a more efficient use of local resources, in the form of United Nations experts and universities (see box 2, which describes one example).

65. Another possible benefit triggered by a better use of blended courses is their provision in different languages. At the scale of the United Nations system, there is a prevailing tendency towards the use of English-based learning resources, irrespective of the geographical location of the organizations, neglecting the need for diversity and the requirement of bilingualism (French and English) incumbent on most of the secretariats of the United Nations organizations.

Box 2: Think globally, learn locally. A case study: Geneva

Geneva hosts the headquarters of nine of the JIU participating organizations, in addition to large parts of the United Nations Secretariat – the United Nations Office at Geneva and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Most of the universities in Geneva have traditional and well-developed affinities with the learning priorities of the United Nations system's staff and are well prepared to provide learning services and solutions.

The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, created to meet the institutional and learning needs of the League of Nations, is a bilingual French-English university with a distinctive global vision. The Centre for Continuing and Distance Education of the University of Geneva recently strengthened the orientation of its curricula towards international organizations and developed programmes related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Geneva-based learning managers may also be interested in benefiting from the experience in development of digital technologies for learning available at the Centre for Learning Sciences (LEARN) of the École

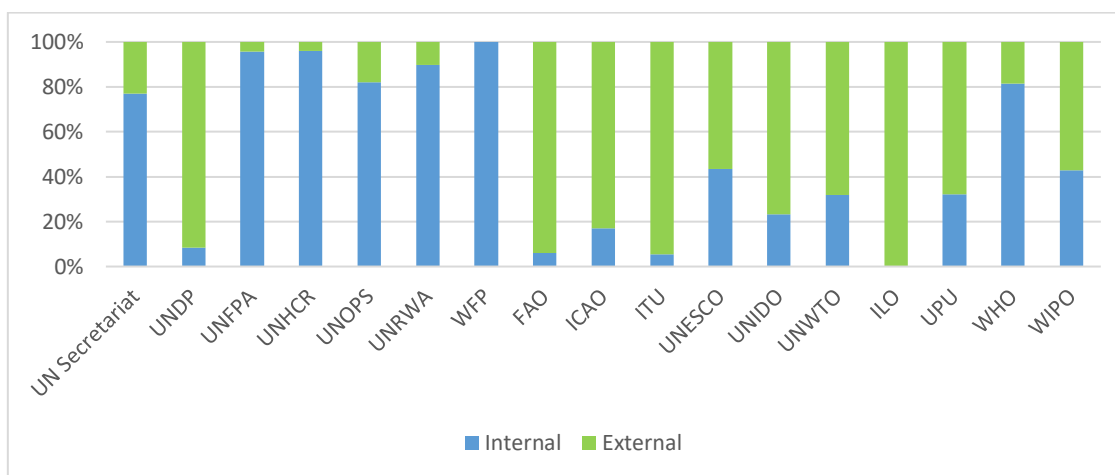
polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne and its EdTech Collider, or Technologies de Formation et Apprentissage, an academic unit of the University of Geneva specialized in educational technologies.

66. **The Inspector recommends that the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should identify and, to the extent possible, use the learning resources available at local level, taking into account all working languages.**

Internal versus external learning

67. The interviews also highlighted that, irrespective of the learning format mostly in use, the imperative to sustain continuous learning is adding a new architecture of organization and governance to that traditionally associated with learning units. In several organizations, a dual structure seems to be emerging. One part of it is a decentralized network of interactive courses to advance core competencies and skills through external learning experience platforms. The other is a more hierarchical structure for the regulation of core learning activities through corporate learning platforms. Figure 4 is based on the data provided by the participating organizations and offers a broad picture of the use of internal versus external learning provision. In reality, there are learning programmes with a mixed configuration; therefore, the figures should not be read in the absolute. For example, in ILO, internal human resources and expertise are engaged in the design and delivery of external programmes.

Figure 4 – Internal versus external providers of learning programmes



68. Internal training is widely utilized for corporate – primarily mandatory – training priorities, involving core skills development. Among the reasons quoted by learning managers for the use of internal training were: (a) cost-related issues; (b) flexibility: the learning content can be developed and adapted as required in line with changes in organizational direction; and (c) recognizable qualifications for career development within the organization.²⁴ Internal or commissioned staff members who are aware of the institutional realities of the organization can deliver learning programmes. On the other hand, internal trainers may be influenced by their familiarity with the organization, which sometimes translates into an inertial perspective on the content.

69. With regard to costs in particular, some organizations noted that it is often “not necessary to contract the world’s leading expert for a high-priced seminar to teach introductory concepts to staff when the requirements are for basic acquaintance with organizational core values and competencies.”²⁵ However, some human resources offices claimed that developing internal training could take up a considerable amount of staff time and entail consequences on other tasks.

70. External training offers the possibility of acquiring specialist knowledge from an impartial expert and may present new ways of approaching learning needs that could otherwise be beyond the organizations’ reach. According to some interviewees and survey responses, United Nations staff generally felt that internal trainers were perhaps knowledgeable enough in their specific areas, but they did not necessarily have adequate

²⁴ UNHCR, for example, requires staff to complete certain training courses to be eligible to apply to higher posts within their work streams.

²⁵ Source: Interviews, October- November 2019, Geneva.

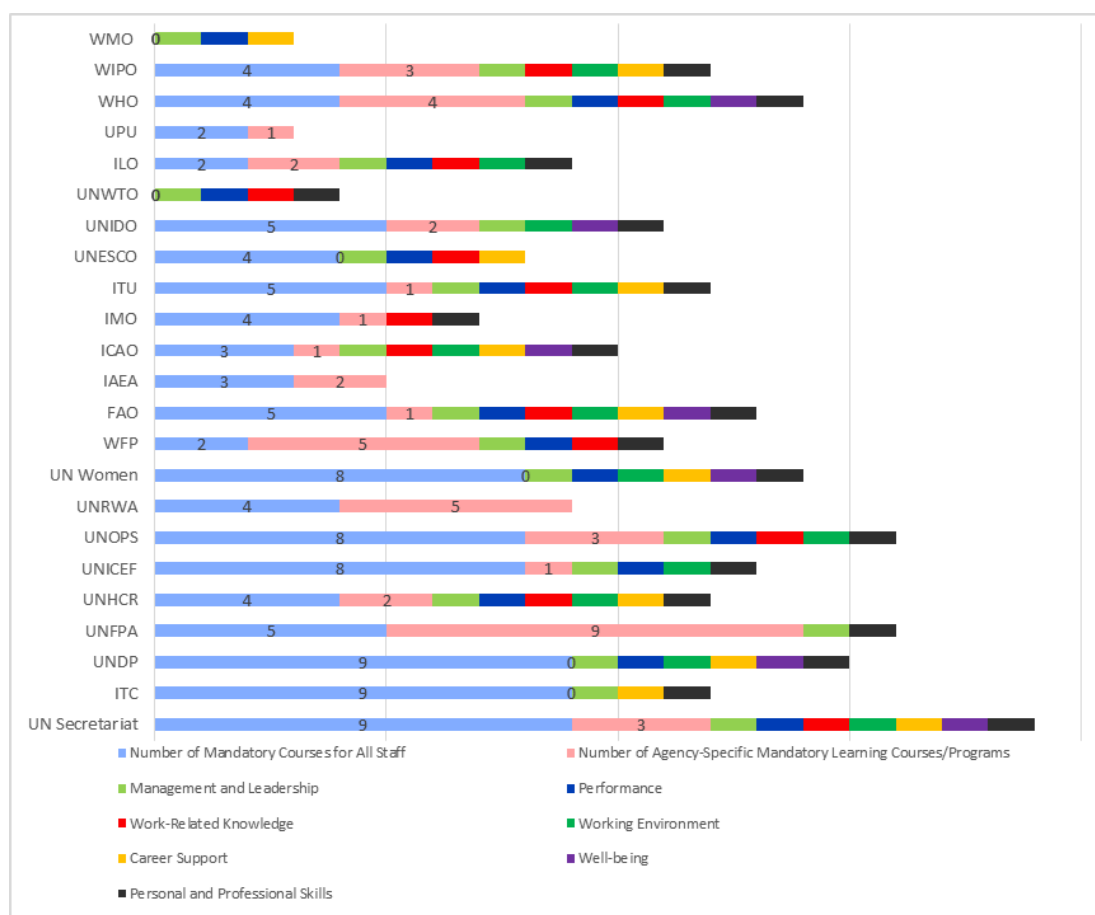
training skills, as delivering training material was just one among their many responsibilities. This was particularly the case for specific technical skills, where there is a strong preference for external providers due to their academic or professional reputations and easier recognition or accreditation.

71. External learning brings the extra advantage of networking. Staff will have the opportunity to interact with people from other organizations with similar responsibilities and roles. They may thereby trade experiences with others, gaining an external perspective and returning with new ideas. Detached from their daily working environment, they may be more able to immerse themselves in the course content and then pass on acquired knowledge to other staff within their teams.

Mandatory courses versus optional courses

72. Data collected from the participating organizations point to a strong emphasis on the United Nations mandatory courses,²⁶ which are associated with considerable spending of core resources, compared to optional courses aimed at serving professional skills. The Inspector noted that, in comparison with other international organizations (the World Bank, the European Commission, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and the International Secretariat of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), the United Nations system requires staff to complete approximately three times as many mandatory courses. There are also views among staff members that mandatory courses often just “state the obvious” or that they are a “tick-a-box” exercise with no practical effect.

Figure 5 – Mandatory versus optional courses



Source: Responses to the JIU questionnaire (number of courses on the horizontal axis).

²⁶ The nine mandatory learning courses in accordance with ST/SGB/2018/4, included in the data available, are: 1) BSAFE: Security Awareness; 2) Ethics and Integrity; 3) An Introduction to Gender Equality; 4) HIV/AIDS in the Workplace; 5) United Nations Human Rights Responsibilities; 6) Information Security; 7) Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse; 8) Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Abuse; 9) Preventing fraud and corruption. The optional learning thematic areas include, but are not limited to: Management and leadership; Performance; Work-related knowledge; Working environment; Career support; Well-being; and Personal and professional skills.

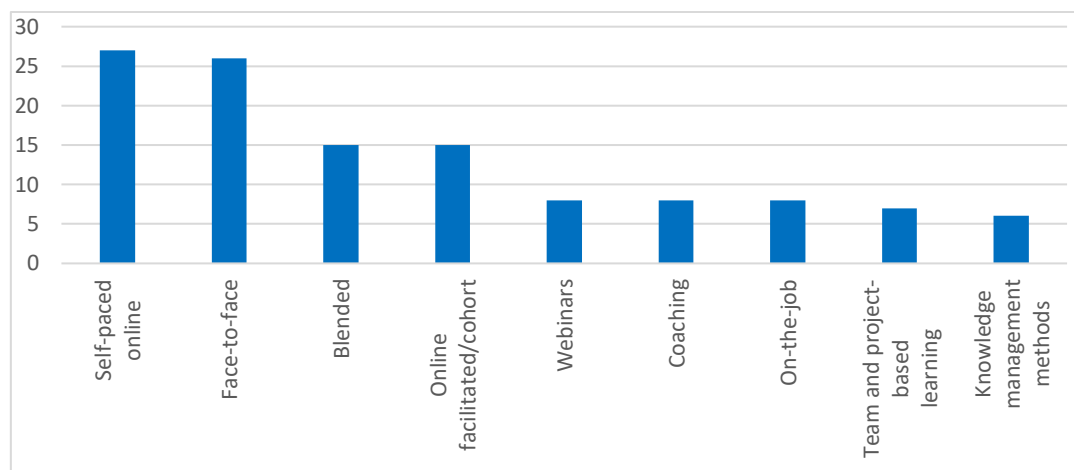
73. As many of the mandatory courses deal with ethics and integrity, the Inspector cannot but re-emphasize the paramount importance of those values for United Nations staff. The training courses are critical in shaping a common culture and identity and ensuring that core values are understood and implemented in the same manner at all levels. Nevertheless, he draws attention to Article 101 of the Charter of the United Nations, which implies that “the highest standards ... of integrity” are **preconditions** of being employed. Ethical behaviour should be monitored and deviation from it sanctioned: **ethics and integrity are a statutory obligation to which all new staff should subscribe from the first day, not an aspirational condition to reach by training**. While the need to help maintain a safe and productive working space through adequate training on staff obligations and codes of conduct under United Nations rules and regulations remains valid, the **Inspector encourages executive heads to review and fine-tune – including in terms of resources – the mix between a minimum of mandatory courses and learning programmes that support staff in developing the professional skills they need to perform their duties**.

2.4. Instructional approaches

74. With a few exceptions, the Inspector did not find enough information about the actual instructional approaches or the processes used in the design and delivery of courses.

75. More than 50 per cent of the responses received from the participating organizations indicate the use of more than four different approaches. Furthermore, a relatively high percentage (70 per cent) of responses report not only using different approaches for different programmes, but also mixing diversity within individual programmes, which is potentially a good practice, promising better learning outcomes at a reasonable cost. Most of the organizations (around 80 per cent) specify the medium (in person or online, for example) or overall format of the course (self-paced or tutor-led, for example). Figure 6 shows, on the vertical axis, the number of courses reported by the participating organizations and sub-entities of the United Nations Secretariat.

Figure 6 – Learning approaches



76. The Inspector notes that the overall format of a programme does not necessarily indicate the pedagogical and instructional approach used. For example, within the face-to-face format, a range of different approaches may be used: from traditional didactic teaching (where the teacher is the expert and students “receive” the knowledge and experience from the expert) to personalized coaching or other constructivist learning methods. Similarly, when e-learning platforms are used, a wide range of different approaches is available.

77. However, most responses to the corporate questionnaire do not show that selection and evaluation of instructional and pedagogical approaches play an important role in designing learning programmes. This could signify that many organizations are not systematically looking at the effectiveness of different methods, even when they choose innovative approaches or formats. A lack of effort in this phase of the learning design can easily result in programmes that do not effectively reach the desired learning objectives, even if they formally cover the intended scope and topics.

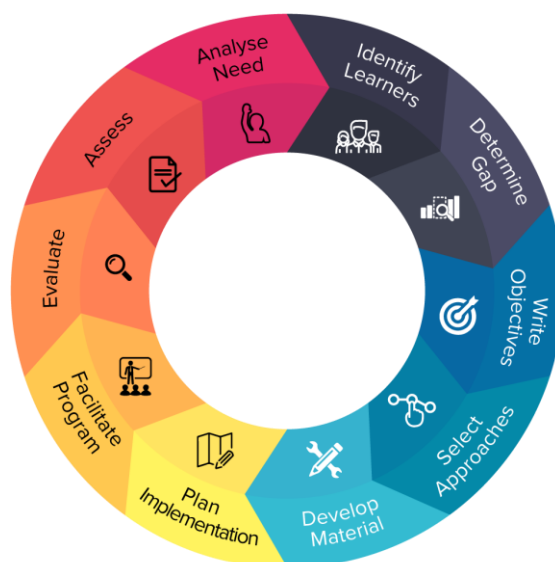
78. Additionally, in an era of rapid digital innovation and communication from vendors of learning services, it is even more difficult, in the absence of a proper analysis and use of the corresponding instructional approach, to ensure that innovative methods and tools deployed in learning programmes are actually effective. A low-cost course may indeed save some funds, but fail to effectively achieve the learning objectives.

79. Very few responses explicitly mention any detailed analysis of learning needs or the process of matching the most effective approach with the goals of a particular programme. It is worth noting a few good practices in that respect.

80. The UNHCR Global Learning and Development Centre uses a well-developed and comprehensive process when assessing and designing learning programmes. The process includes essential elements such as:

- (a) Where teams requesting new learning programmes hold the relevant subject knowledge, expert teams from the Global Learning and Development Centre provide them with support in defining the learning objectives and audience;
- (b) Global Learning and Development Centre teams assess learning requests to ascertain the type of intervention that would best serve the ultimate objectives. Sometimes, this may **not** lead to the design of a new learning programme, but to a different intervention;
- (c) Selecting the right approach(es) for a new learning programme is one of the key stages in a 10-step process (see figure 7).

Figure 7 – The 10-step process



81. The ILO International Training Centre, UNFPA, WFP and the United Nations System Staff College are also among organizations that reported the use of mature analysis and design processes prior to the creation and delivery of learning programmes. For example, the International Training Centre provides an example of a comprehensive approach to learning design and a mature pedagogical approach. Its methodology, called “Compass”, covers analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation and includes a safe space for innovation in learning.

82. UN-Women reports work in researching and publishing both theoretical work and good pedagogical practices contributing to gender equality in training (as well as training for gender equality).

83. **The Inspector emphasizes the importance of recognizing, at early stages in the design of learning programmes, which type of learning is required for the desired learning outcomes and recommends the examination and use of the good practices mentioned above and/or other existing tools.²⁷ This**

²⁷ For example, Bloom’s Taxonomy (which uses specific categories to divide the cognitive domain, on the basis of which the types of learning requirements are mapped with appropriate learning activities), the Gagne’s Taxonomy which lists five domains of learning outcomes, or SOLO (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes) taxonomy.

conclusion is relevant both for learning functions that come under the responsibility of the human resources department and those of specially mandated learning service providers.

2.5. Learning entities

84. One expression of the diversity of approaches adopted in different United Nations organizations is the random use of designations for the entities in charge of learning. These are most frequently called *centres* (UNHCR Global Learning and Development Centre, ILO International Training Centre, UN-Women Training Centre, UNIDO Investment Learning Centre, United Nations Office at Geneva Centre for Learning and Multilingualism) or *academies* (International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Academy, WIPO Academy, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Academy, ITC Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Trade Academy, FAO elearning Academy, and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Landscape Academy). There are also *campuses* (the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) Global Campus), *schools* (the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) School of Nuclear Knowledge Management) and *platforms*.

85. While the Inspector is aware that uniformity in establishing learning entities is neither possible, nor desirable, he notes that the choice of designations, particularly for academies, seems to be made completely at random, in the absence of any clear criteria. Often there is no distinction between an academy and a centre, although the two categories may have the same main features of entities that other organizations call e-learning platforms.

86. In view of: (a) the proliferation of learning services that exist outside the United Nations system, where universities and specialized learning organizations have helped create a highly competitive environment; and (b) the increasing demand for recognition, comparability and certification of newly acquired knowledge by United Nations staff, there is a need for a more rigorous use of such designations in an objective way, to give a clearer picture of the nature of the establishments and of their products.

87. The Inspector recommends that the executive heads of United Nations system organizations should agree, through the network of learning managers, on a minimum set of criteria/principles for the definition of academies and use them accordingly.

88. Such criteria/principles may include, inter alia:

- (a) Whether the respective entity has some degree of operational autonomy;
- (b) Whether it has a physical infrastructure (classrooms, laboratories, etc.);
- (c) Who the creators of the learning content are (internal and/or external providers);
- (d) What certification policies they use, including on recognition and portability;
- (e) The post-learning arrangements (network of alumni, impact evaluations, etc.).

89. The implementation of this recommendation may bring more coherence and convergence, not by imposing models, but by raising the standards of quality, credibility and accountability beyond nominal designations.

2.6. Non-training solutions

90. The review of learning activities across the United Nations system highlighted two main trends: firstly, learning solutions are developed in a reactive, often transactional mode, without substantive or conceptual alignment with strategic priorities, as previously indicated; and secondly, there is a tendency to oversimplify, identifying learning with training as organizations try to solve every problem – whether of competencies, skills, motives, behaviour or performance – through courses. However, training may not always be the best solution and assessments of learning needs ought to acknowledge that from the outset. A simple subscription to a course may not address actual needs, no matter how well designed and developed the course may be. Avoiding blanket training options and matching the available solutions to organizational or system-wide needs is the way to avoid such pitfalls.

91. Non-training alternatives were highlighted by the participating organizations as bringing added value at a system-wide level. Among them, job shadowing and on-the-job training allow staff members to gain knowledge and understanding about their responsibilities and tasks by observing staff serving in other functions. Learning objectives should be defined and agreed upon between the visiting staff members and their supervisors prior to commencement of the job-shadowing assignment.

92. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNDP and the United Nations Office at Geneva offer such examples. At UNDP, short-term professional posts were in some cases covered by national officers from field locations, who were thus given the opportunity to serve at headquarters and acquire experience. Staff of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs were allowed to serve one day per week in a different function within the same team or division in order to gain more experience in different roles. The United Nations Office at Geneva implemented a developmental cross-assignments framework for its own staff and staff of other United Nations Secretariat departments in Geneva.

93. UNICEF practices stretch assignments, where staff can take up short-term assignments in another office or function. While filling a capacity gap, they also represent a practical learning opportunity that works both ways: the individual learns on the job, but also brings external expertise and knowledge to the office where she/he has been assigned.

94. The United Nations Department of Peace Operations uses tabletop exercises, which require the participation of an entire entity, including top-level management in simulated role play based on real-life mission scenarios. Apart from the learning dimension, these exercises also enable the organization to identify any policy, capability and preparedness gaps and to design solutions to address them.

95. The UNHCR Innovation Fellowship programme combines two face-to-face workshops with coaching, mentoring and embedding the learning into workplace challenges for participants. In addition, the programme uses gamification to sustain participants' motivation through the duration of the programme.

96. The ILO Executive Leadership and Strategic Management Programme combines a face-to-face workshop with action-learning projects aimed at integrating learning into practice.

Mentoring schemes

97. In mentoring schemes, new or less experienced staff join more experienced colleagues in order to learn and to seek advice on issues related to their roles and responsibilities, tasks, career aspirations and the organizational reality as a whole. Both mentors and mentees can benefit from the contributions of new colleagues and new ideas through a collaborative, knowledge-sharing relationship. Each mentoring relationship and the topics discussed are based on the mentee's individual needs and the mentor's area of expertise. The United Nations Secretariat young professionals programme and the junior professionals' programmes of other organizations often encourage or facilitate mentoring agreements between junior staff entering the organization and more senior colleagues.

98. The UNAIDS Mentoring Programme for Women was launched in April 2014 and has since supported 64 mentoring pairs through distance training and guidance. The programme is intended to increase job satisfaction and contribute to professional development for mentees from all categories of staff. WIPO has a similar initiative whereby mid-level female professionals are selected and supported by the learning unit through targeted coaching and learning activities. In 2019, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs launched a mentoring programme, which targets women and national staff, in support of gender parity and geographical diversity.

99. ILO has recently institutionalized a global managed mentoring programme for professional staff in the P4, P5 and Director categories.²⁸ It is a formal nine-month programme that aims to support staff in: (a) achieving their learning objectives and career goals; and (b) understanding the organizational culture and the political environment. Staff are expected to work together and gain confidence in their own roles and functions, build networks, discuss work-related challenges and connect their roles with organizational vision and strategic thinking.

100. Unlike other similar initiatives in the United Nations system, the ILO mentoring programme is a structured process, supported by the learning manager. **The Inspector takes note with interest of such**

²⁸ ILO Information Circular on Mentoring Programme, November 2019.

initiatives and encourages other organizations to explore possibilities for similar projects within the frameworks they deem appropriate.

Staff mobility

101. Recent studies show that a major form of acquiring skills is to improve internal talent mobility, that is, the ability to move people effectively among jobs, functions and geographical locations. If that ability is needed in modern multinational corporations, it is equally desirable in the United Nations organizations, both individually and as a system. Talent mobility is a way to embed collaboration and agility into an organization's culture and help employees to learn. Learning stimulates mobility and agility by equipping staff to be competitive applicants elsewhere and allowing the recipient organizations to attract talent and new skills.

102. A new assignment, whether short- or long-term, enables staff to embark on new learning curves and assists in breaking silos, expanding knowledge horizons and maximizing shared organizational learning. The European Commission, for example, mentions internal mobility as one of the key components of its Learning and Development Strategy.²⁹ This involves adding learning to work as the staff member brings new skills and competencies, on the one hand, and extracting learning from work as he or she performs in different functions and organizations, on the other. Mobility should be perceived as a natural progression, instead of a major change in one's career and learning path. New technological tools enable a well-informed mobility process between functions, agencies, jobs and geographical locations. However, it should be noted that, of the organizations consulted for this review, only UNICEF, WFP, OCHA and IFAD referred to mobility as a learning experience.

103. IFAD is currently piloting a programme of staff exchanges of three to six months' duration with external organizations such as international financial institutions, whereby salary and travel costs will be covered by the sending organizations. IFAD has also taken bold steps in aligning mobility schemes to career development and talent management, a practice that should be studied by other organizations in the United Nations system.

104. In a recent system-wide review, JIU found meagre evidence of inter-agency mobility³⁰. While staff value the existence of mobility opportunities and organizations are eager to access new knowledge and experiences, inter-agency mobility remains at a modest level and is not actively encouraged or valued by most organizations. This perspective could change if learning were to be systematically and rigorously included within a panoply of arguments underlying inter-agency mobility and observed in practice. The absence of a common framework in support of exchange arrangements makes it difficult to focus on learning through professional mobility.

Social learning

105. The main non-training option explored by means of the corporate questionnaire was the use of social learning. Social learning is defined as the opportunity given to people to learn from one another, via observation, imitation, and modelling. It is also referred to as informal or unstructured learning. The social learning theory is seen as a bridge between behaviourist and cognitive learning as it encompasses attention, memory and motivation.

106. Several organizations report that the social interaction in learning programmes is important in sustaining motivation, promoting exchange of experience from different contexts and reinforcing learning, among other factors. For example, OCHA reports action learning as an informal practice used in collaboration with the Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies.

107. Several organizations reported, as social learning practices, brown bag lunches and similar participatory seminars. As with other learning activities, the format itself (a seminar) is not necessarily the single determining factor of the social dimension of a learning activity. The seminars have to be designed and facilitated with social learning in mind. For example, a seminar with an external expert speaker and limited or no significant time for discussion does not create an opportunity for social learning. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management reports that it considers staff participation in industry events with tutorials and group training as a social learning activity. Several organizations consider social learning

²⁹ European Commission, Learning and Development Strategy of the European Commission, document C (2016) 3829 final.

³⁰ JIU/REP/2019/8, Review of staff exchange and similar inter-agency mobility measures in United Nations system organizations.

as built-in blended programmes. Knowledge sharing and communities of practice are also reported as specific forms of social learning.

108. Knowledge sharing is directly relevant to each staff member's responsibilities and functions and is immediately applicable. It is one of the primary ways in which staff gain the knowledge and experience necessary to perform their jobs effectively. Knowledge sharing in an organizational context relies on (a) effective communications among peers, managers and staff and (b) internal mobility to facilitate knowledge flow and document/knowledge management, in addition to learning and training activities. Practised at system-wide level, knowledge sharing will contribute to enhanced collaboration and coherence in addressing the complex issues entailed by the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

109. Communities of practice can exist in face-to-face environments but, with the current widespread use of Internet-based communications, many communities have emerged in virtual or mixed-mode format. Communities of practice – as a locus of knowledge sharing, learning and practice – are collaborative, interactive networks of individuals within a generally defined topic of knowledge that continue to develop. Several organizations (UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO, WIPO, ILO, DESA and DPO in the United Nations Secretariat) employ communities of practice broadly to facilitate knowledge exchange among staff, particularly within field locations and headquarters. Yammer and LinkedIn groups are used for that purpose.

110. However, as a strategic resource, the benefits of knowledge sharing as a learning practice are not sufficiently encouraged at managerial level, as indicated in a previous JIU report³¹. The executive heads of United Nations system organizations are still expected to sponsor the use of communities of practice in their respective organizations as a means of stimulating interaction, knowledge sharing and solution searching within their respective organizations and system-wide. In addition, executive heads have also been urged to take incremental measures aimed at embedding knowledge management skills and knowledge sharing abilities in their respective staff performance appraisal systems, annual work plans, job descriptions and organizational core competences.

111. The Inspector notes that opportunities for improvement exist across the United Nations system, through capitalizing on collaborative internal communication tools (such as Yammer and SharePoint), which allow staff to access knowledge in other departments. It is also possible to make knowledge easily accessible through the use of a single search tool allowing access to all repositories of knowledge across the United Nations.

³¹ JIU/REP/2016/10, Knowledge Management in the United Nations system.

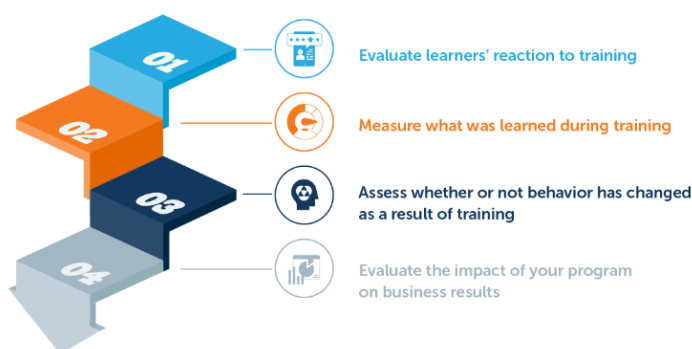
3. In search of a strategic perspective

3.1. Evaluation of learning activities: moving forward within existing means

112. The inputs received for the review did not substantiate the existence of a systematic and comprehensive way of evaluating impact. The development of a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating the impact of learning activities and skills acquired by staff is identified as a key challenge, even in organizations with dedicated learning or talent management units and budgets. More than half of the organizations in the United Nations system (57 per cent) do not have a systematic way to monitor and evaluate learning. The Kirkpatrick model for evaluating the results of learning is reported to be used by 36 per cent of the organizations. The Phillips model is used by 7 per cent.³²

Figure 8 – The Kirkpatrick four-level training evaluation model

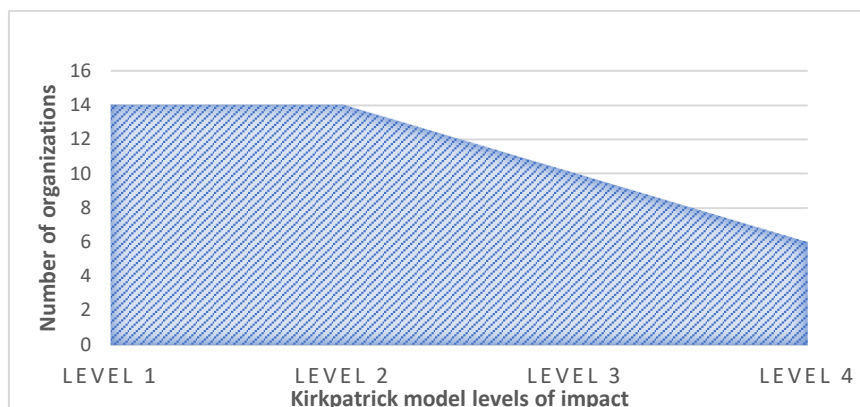
Kirkpatrick's Four-level Training Evaluation Model



113. Level 1 in the Kirkpatrick model, which assesses immediate reaction, was quoted by many organizations as the least cost-intensive. It provides prima facie information and rough guidance for an immediate impression. Most organizations also reported implementation of level 2. Yet, even among those that claim to use the Kirkpatrick model, most organizations, with only a few exceptions, do not manage to collect and assess data beyond level 2. The explanations reported relate to: insufficient budget or time allocation; complexity of proposed evaluation methods; compelling priorities; lack of expertise; lack of understanding about appropriate methods and tools or even unconditional trust in the learning solutions available; mismatch between learning objectives and actual work tasks; underestimation of the impact of benchmarks.

114. For example, after completing a training activity, participants should be requested to submit some form of post-training report, followed by a second one completed at a later date, which would serve to evaluate programme impact/application of the learning by both the attendee and sometimes subsequently their supervisor. The review did not identify sufficient documented data to demonstrate the submission of such post-training reports. While some good examples (UNHCR, UNICEF, WIPO, WFP) illustrate the possibility of doing so, without the existence of actual benchmarks for learning at the organizational level, the impact will remain hard to determine. In other words, it is not enough to prove that learning has happened, if learning does not lead to behavioural changes or improvement in staff performance, as part of a learning strategy with clear objectives.

³² The Kirkpatrick-Katzell four-level model—conceived by Raymond Katzell in the 1950s and enhanced by Donald Kirkpatrick over the following six decades—has left an indelible mark on the workplace learning field, particularly with regard to transforming the training-and-development concept into the learning-to-performance goal. The Phillips model states that, after determining a learning programme's business impact at Kirkpatrick's Level 4, it is possible to translate that impact into monetary terms and compare it to the total cost of the programme, in order to calculate return on investment. The cost includes programme development and delivery, plus the labour cost of time for learners to complete the training.

Figure 9 – Measuring the impact of learning: the Kirkpatrick model

115. The Inspector noted that level 3 and 4 evaluations are perceived as too complicated and costly to apply. Most interlocutors from both United Nations and non-United Nations organizations noted that the volume of resources needed for an evaluation at level 4 might exceed the resources spent on learning per se. Levels 3 and 4 also remain silent about measuring the learning support and non-training activities that are needed to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

116. The Inspector recognizes the difficulty of applying a theoretical model to the letter or, for that matter, in all learning programmes. He is also aware of the vulnerability of the Kirkpatrick model, notwithstanding its longevity and influence.³³ However, the use of a gradual sequence of levels in measuring impact remains a useful methodological approach. In this respect, the participating organizations should prioritize, by evaluating at these levels the training programmes that are directly tied to what the organization deems to be essential in successfully meeting its mandates. Notably, as mentioned by UNITAR, evaluation is dependent on the context.

Box 3 – Revisiting theoretical myths (2): “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it”

This is another influential maxim with controversial origins that is highly popular among managers. A superficial use of this pronouncement can lead to policies that can have a harmful effect on activities whose results may not be measurable in quantities or which could result in intangible values. Learning is one of those areas.

The statement is attributed to Peter Drucker, an author of classic management theory. The influence of this maxim is due to a considerable extent to its association with his name. Yet, there is no evidence that Peter Drucker ever wrote or said it: it is simply a misquotation from or misunderstanding of other reflections on the role of measurement in management. He did not even believe the message it conveys. Indeed, as can be seen in his writings, Drucker believed that measuring results and performance as “feedback from results on the work and on the planning process itself” is necessary to assess the effectiveness of an organization. But he also believed that not everything could be held to that standard.³⁴

The maxim “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it” should be used with caution. It can have at least two grave consequences: neglecting important factors because they cannot be measured quantitatively and focusing on less meaningful ones, solely because they are easy to measure. The sister maxim also attributed to Peter Drucker, namely “What gets measured gets managed”, is equally apocryphal.

³³ Among the conceptual vulnerabilities of the model are some of direct relevance to its low level of use in the United Nations system: (a) it implies a hierarchy of values related to the different levels; (b) it assumes that each level is associated with the previous and the next levels; (c) it fails to take account of the various intervening variables affecting learning and transfer; (d) it ignores the frequent failure of training to transfer into the workplace, due to the range of organizational factors which may inhibit success and, in particular, cost in time and human and financial resources.

³⁴ Paul Zak, “Measurement Myopia”, Drucker Institute, 7 April 2013. Available at: <https://www.drucker.institute/thedx/measurement-myopia/>

117. The Inspector shares the views expressed by some interviewees that the outcome of learning activities in the United Nations system will not result in a measurable increase in profits or number of clients, as may be the case in the private sector. Nevertheless, learning might lead to an osmotic, gradual process of acquiring knowledge, which may be conducive to improved performance and efficiency at the individual and organizational level. The results may not always be numerical or measurable, but that does not diminish the importance of learning and the need for impact evaluation. The lesson for learning managers is that they should develop their own modalities for evaluating the impact of learning activities in innovative and fit-for-purpose ways, involving the learners proactively.

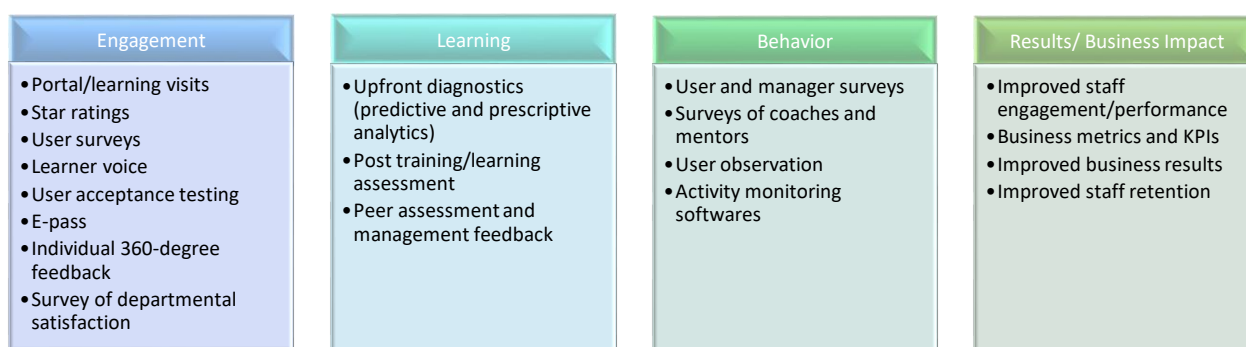
118. The Inspector notes the difficulties in implementing a theoretical evaluation model in circumstances of scarce resources, as mentioned by many organizations. However, the question of evaluation of results generated by learning activities deserves further analysis. There is a need for intensified efforts to map out the learning ecosystem more holistically while optimizing the use of existing resources. **The Inspector invites further reflection on evaluation practices, in particular on the options offered by new technologies, on the one hand, and the motivation for more engagement and commitment from the learners themselves, on the other.**

119. **The Inspector invites the learning managers to experiment, on a voluntary basis, with a system of provisional certification, prior to the final certification, in order to ensure a minimum level of meaningful impact evaluation and to keep learners motivated to participate in the evaluation.** Some essential learning activities should have an embedded automatic feature, which should function as a provisional certification, attesting to the successful completion of the course only. The automated feature is essential as it is meant to avoid the need for additional human resources. The final certificate will be issued only after a specified lapse of time, at the end of which the learner will respond to an impact evaluation questionnaire, which should also be automatically integrated into the system.

120. That said, the JIU team identified elements of an evolution towards more proactive measures, not necessarily labelled as evaluation or impact measurements. While data sources often exist, they are disjointed and are not embedded in the learning management system or performance management reviews, and thereby compromise opportunities for uptake and meaningful consolidation.

121. The JIU research team identified many such data – not necessarily registered or treated as sources for assessing learning – from simple statistics on portal visits to 360-degree feedback³⁵ (see figure 10 below), which can be used in reviewing learning outcomes.

Figure 10 – Measurement of impact: existing data sources than can be used



122. **The Inspector invites the learning managers to make better use of the resources available – in particular with regard to performance data – in order to effectively capture the learning footprint of staff and readjust the learning priorities of the organizational units and the individual learners.**

123. Results related to the impact of learning can have a significant effect on strategic planning and be utilized for benchmarking if there is an agreement on common goals and a common vision at a system-wide

³⁵ A 360-degree feedback exercise involves feedback being gathered from an employee's subordinates, colleagues and supervisor(s), as well as a self-evaluation by the employee themselves.

level. The United Nations system could develop and use its own model of learning evaluation. Evaluations should include monitoring indicators and reflection by everyone involved in the training design, content and delivery method. The objective of evaluation is to ensure not only the necessary level and depth of professional and competency-based skills, but also that the learning approach and the instructors are effective and appropriate.

124. A well-defined learning measurement strategy will allow organizations to align tools with long-term planning and map the learning ecosystem. Consulting with training/learning providers across themes or widely delivered courses at a system-wide level can stimulate reflections on the most appropriate delivery modalities and provide space for system-wide effectiveness and the encouragement of a system-based culture of learning.

125. However, the Inspector notes with concern that while organizations have provisions for soliciting feedback from learners, the review could not identify a training providers/instructors' network that feeds into learning policies or provides feedback and evaluation data on them to senior management. Managers at senior level should also contribute feedback and input for evaluation.

126. Implementation of the following recommendation would establish alternatives to the existing theoretical learning evaluation models, in particular when the latter are unrealistic or unaffordable.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should integrate the evaluation findings on learning into the learning management systems and use them effectively to inform decision-making processes on future learning activities.

3.2. Alignment of learning activities with overall objectives

127. The Inspector found that many organizations take a narrow approach to learning and talent management – one that is aimed at compliance and short-term goals rather than increased competitiveness in the long-term. Interviews with human resources professionals and managers across the United Nations system showed that, for reasons related to current operational urgencies or time pressure, many organizations remain overly focused on the immediate need to attract highly skilled employees at the expense of developing a holistic talent management system. As a result, the strategic dimension of employees' engagement, upskilling and reskilling is undervalued.

128. The United Nations system is expected to perform and deliver in a rapidly changing political, social, economic and technological environment and is highly dependent on the expertise of its staff. Improving performance is only made possible by stimulating staff creativity, rewarding risks and innovation and investing in continuous learning. Most of the United Nations programmes, funds and specialized agencies are knowledge organizations, whose employees need to adapt to diverse and changing requirements, be flexible and learn as they perform their roles. If these strategic priorities and this vision are cascaded over into training and development goals, staff will be better able to see how they can be operational and their work meaningful in relation to their everyday jobs and tasks."³⁶

129. As the main capital of the United Nations is human resources, learning can serve as a permanent tool to improve the efficiency of that capital. However, learning remains fragmented and is not deployed as part of broader strategies in support of organizational effectiveness, talent management and career development. When in need of specific skills and competencies, many organizations are being driven to implement ad hoc, short-term solutions, to the detriment of broader talent management efforts that would serve the strategic objectives of the organization.

130. The majority of organizations consulted did not have sufficient data to show a clear link between specific training programmes and their strategic objectives of: (a) organizational effectiveness, (b) talent management and (c) enhanced job performance. It thus becomes difficult to assess and identify bottlenecks in the rationale for expenditure incurred and to justify new learning activities or even to demonstrate the continued appropriateness and sustainability of existing or proposed activities. It is also difficult to assess

³⁶ Interviews, October 2019, Geneva.

whether a learning solution is indeed the outcome of strategic direction and corporate objectives, policy oversight or stakeholder engagement. Moreover, learning needs are not monitored in conjunction with the use of short-term or individual contractors, which perpetuates learning gaps at organizational level. Managers were often of the opinion that business exigencies did not allow them to wait until staff are trained for specific tasks. As a result, they resort to excessive use of external contractors.

131. While most of the organizations under review make specific reference to organizational policies, they do not provide sufficient evidence of concrete measures that ensure that such an alignment takes place. The presence of a learning board at the senior management level is seen as a guarantee of the alignment of learning priorities with strategic objectives. However, there is no convincing chain of evidence, supported by established business drivers and measurement tools, that proves the existence of a long-term strategy monitored by such boards.

132. A good learning programme is more than the sum of its constituent elements and host platforms. For learners, each programme is the key aspect of their experience but should be part of a broader strategy and an enabling learning environment. Findings from the review indicate that learning solutions are often insufficiently mapped at the organizational or system-wide level for coherence purposes. Unless talent managers shift towards a more comprehensively planned approach to learning, they are doomed to remain in an “endless struggle to pursue and retain the high performance of ‘a few’, while neglecting the needs of the many and ‘the whole’.”³⁷

133. That need becomes even more evident in organizations with a large operational footprint and decentralized nature, where learning is initiated at the country level. For example, OCHA, WFP, ILO, UNDP, IFAD, UNHCR, and UNICEF invest substantial efforts in meeting learning priorities as they arise from operational and programme priorities.

134. However, coordination and decisions on learning priorities that are conducted between headquarters and duty stations are often ad hoc and are limited to technical curricula and needs. Learning managers often try to respond without necessarily assessing how the needs fit into the broader strategic priorities of the organization. For example, interviewees in some organizations where country representations have their own budget for learning, highlighted that learning at the field level is often delivered on demand, through a transactional approach, without adequate attention to corporate agendas and results frameworks. The Inspector believes that, while needs may differ from one country to another, learning services should be treated as the product of a comprehensive analysis at the organizational level, both horizontally and vertically.

135. The Inspector notes with interest that some organizations (e.g. WFP and UNHCR) have taken steps to achieve more coherence and synergies between the corporate and the field levels, offering possible examples for application in other agencies.

136. WFP created key learning responsibilities within technical teams across the organization, supported by a decentralized, interactive learning management ecosystem. In recent years, following the growth of WFP’s field operations, learning has increasingly been seen as a responsibility shared among the senior management, line managers and staff. The newly structured teams are responsible for coordinating, managing and monitoring learning priorities. A more structured approach to learning was also supported by the launch of learning portals for WFP functional teams (e.g. supply chain, finance and nutrition).

137. UNHCR has established a centralized systematic learning centre overseeing all learning solutions across the organization. The newly reconfigured Global Learning and Development Centre of UNHCR looks at the whole spectrum of talent development, including learning solutions, talent and leadership development, performance management and recognition. Learning has become more strategically linked to workforce and succession planning (including leadership), career development and performance. The Centre is currently in the process of developing its workforce planning (i.e. identifying current and future workforce gaps and putting in place succession plans) by enhancing its data collection in relation to the nature of jobs and skills needed. The shift towards a new, more comprehensive approach to learning followed the recommendations of an internal evaluation that the organization should move away from a “transactional” approach to a more holistic and transformational approach to talent management. **The example of UNHCR providing specific guidance and learning solutions to its field offices on their learning priorities should be examined by other organizations in the context of their own frameworks and policies. In addition, field office teams**

³⁷ *ibid.*

should be empowered to engage in continuous learning and adaptation, especially when skill requirements and the need for expertise are shifting fast.

138. In terms of the subject matter covered, several interviewees also signalled that learning products on the same topic of common interest were produced for various organizations across the United Nations system by different providers, in different ways and with different levels of quality. At field level, the geographic location may facilitate joint delivery of curricula.

139. In the opinion of the Inspector, this is a recipe for waste of resources and inconsistent quality of learning at system-wide level, taking into account in particular cross-cutting topics for which there are leading agencies and knowledge holders, such as on refugees (UNHCR Global Learning and Development Centre), labour and social issues (ILO International Training Centre), children (UNICEF) and women (UN-Women). The 2030 Agenda, notwithstanding its emphatically holistic and collaborative vocation, as well as the interdisciplinary and cross-cutting nature of its Goals, was not followed as a driving force leading towards convergence of curricula. On the contrary, learning programmes on Sustainable Development Goals proliferate with no visible concern for coherence, coordination and convergence.

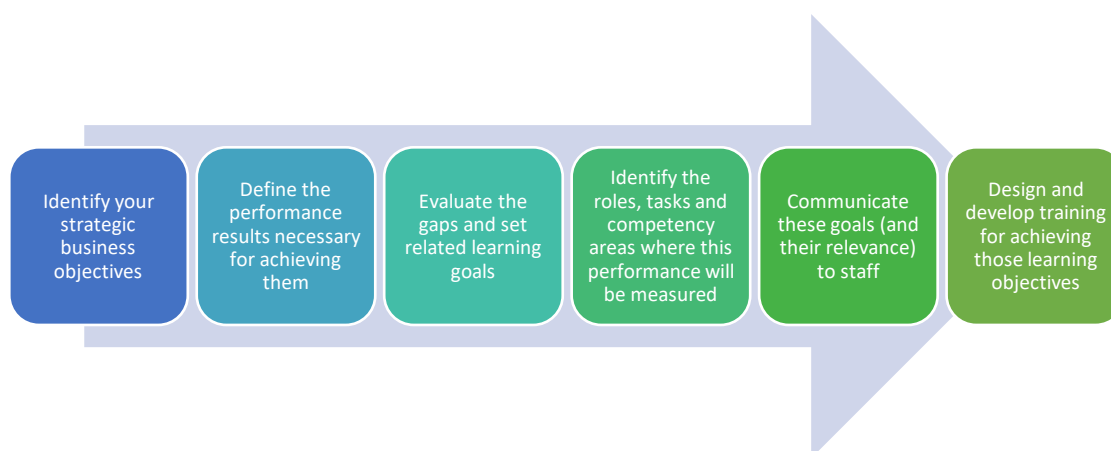
140. While efforts are more coordinated for mandatory courses – as the ownership rights rest heavily within the United Nations Secretariat – the Inspector notes with concern that there are many unexplored opportunities for improved efficiency in sharing resources and asking the most resourceful organizations to lead learning efforts and propose learning solutions and content on specific priorities. Learning units across the United Nations system should analyse relevant learning experiences to identify realistic points of intersection between learning solutions offered, in particular for courses related to the Sustainable Development Goals. Implementation of the following recommendation may lead to more coherence and enhance quality of learning activities.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, in consultation with the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, examine the existing options for a comprehensive joint curriculum or at least system-wide quality assurance of courses related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, by the end of 2021.

141. While good practices exist within the United Nations system, very few organizations offer anything close to a ready template or guideline for the consolidation of learning objectives in the strategic priorities. Responses provided to the JIU corporate questionnaire, interviews with learning managers and best practices from other organizations consulted for this review (in particular the European Commission and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) point to the following steps as organizations try to improve the architecture of corporate learning to better serve strategic objectives:

Figure 11 – Alignment of learning priorities with strategic objectives



142. **The Inspector encourages the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations to consider:**

- (a) **Taking a more strategic, impact-oriented and social approach to learning, including through the coordination of learning operations at the organizational and system-wide levels, adapted to the specific operational requirements of the organization concerned;**
- (b) **Establishing measures to systematically use 360° appraisals to evaluate strategic alignment and priority setting in learning, with a focus on results;**
- (c) **Establishing a roster of United Nations external instructors for knowledge-sharing and peer-learning purposes and institutionalizing channels of communication among them at a system-wide level;**
- (d) **Encouraging the internal learning champions and team coaches to network in order to facilitate continuous learning for inter-agency collaboration, impact evaluation and adaptation.**

3.3. Responding to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

143. Only 12 organizations reported measures having been taken to adapt their learning policies and programmes to the holistic, participatory and collaborative nature of the 2030 Agenda. The measures range from including explicit 2030 Agenda themes in their training portfolio to substantial changes in the orientation and structure of their learning programmes.

144. UNDP mentioned the emphasis it places on an integrated approach, which it has made a cross-cutting issue for country offices. It also sees the need for significant changes in the organizational culture, particularly in respect of working with senior leadership, to support the transition to its new role in the United Nations system.

145. UN-Women reported having developed learning programmes that directly contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 5 – to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls – by assuring that learning needs are assessed at all levels of the organization and for different audiences: a leadership programme that it co-designed with UNSSC and UNFPA, and a course on gender equality in the 2030 Agenda.

146. WFP reported an on-going series of learning needs assessment and capability development initiatives, at both the functional and the cross-functional levels, adapted to the priorities coming from the 2030 Agenda. It is worth noting that WFP is one of the few organizations that mention digital transformation skills as important and part of the development of cross-cutting skills.

147. With the support of UNSSC, WHO developed a course for staff members intended to build understanding of the key aspects of the 2030 Agenda; it includes specific features related to expanded partnerships and explores the linkages with other Sustainable Development Goals.

148. The majority of the remaining organizations reported either modest changes in terms of collaboration with other agencies, prioritization of cross-thematic courses, adding soft skills, etc., or no action at all.

3.4. Premises for inter-agency cooperation

149. Despite the holistic call of the 2030 Agenda, the fragmentation and uncoordinated nature of many learning activities related to the Sustainable Development Goals may have in fact taken learning in the opposite direction: a proliferation of courses and platforms which may undermine the common vision and understanding of the role that the United Nations is expected to play in the implementation of the Agenda.

150. While those working in the learning sciences and research aspire to produce developments and updates valid at universal level, for both the private and the public sector, as a result of globalization and advancement in information and communication technologies, the United Nations organizations continue to work in silos in facing the new challenges rather than reflecting, deciding and acting in common on the most efficient learning designs and pedagogical approaches.

151. It is expected that inter-agency coordination processes will respond to the 2030 Agenda by clarifying the enabling regulatory and administrative frameworks to favour common planning and knowledge sharing with respect to learning at a system-wide level. The team found several notable practices of collaboration in

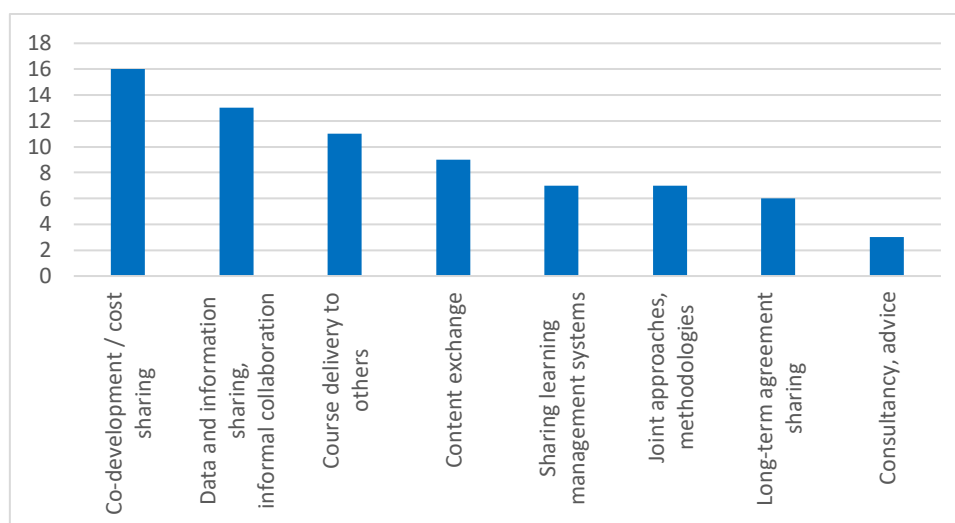
the development of some courses, with joint use of some platforms and centres (notably, the UNICEF Agora platform and the ILO International Training Centre) and some common curricula. One of the most significant collaborative practices is EMERGE, the Programme for Emerging Women Leaders, which was cited as an example by several participating organizations.³⁸

152. In principle, the need for more collaboration is widely acknowledged. Overall, the responses to the corporate questionnaires affirm a willingness to collaborate and recognize the benefits of collaboration among organizations around designing and delivering learning programmes. However, in the absence of a systemic framework, collaboration remains somewhat opportunistic.

153. The Inspector welcomes the recent UNSDG:Learn initiative, set up by UNITAR and the United Nations System Staff College, with support from the Deputy Secretary-General and in coordination with the United Nations Development Coordination Office. The initiative is intended to provide curated learning solutions on sustainable development to interested learners, individuals or organizations, based on offers from more than 50 United Nations entities, other international organizations and universities. **The Inspector encourages the participating organizations to contribute their learning programmes and to use the course or microlearning available, while working collectively to improve the three main components of UNSDG:Learn, namely the platform, the partnership and the programme.**

154. According to the responses to the questionnaire, the other main forms of collaboration are: collaboration on course development; sharing of long-term agreements (LTA) with vendors, content and learning management systems (such as Agora); informal collaboration, data and information sharing (the forms of networking mentioned in figure 12, where the vertical axis indicates the number of organizations, including subentities of the United Nations Secretariat).

Figure 12 – Forms of networking



155. Data collected from this review clearly demonstrate that collaboration is mostly initiated through personal contacts among learning managers and learning professionals. Their participation in the networks provides valuable opportunities for exchange of information on needs, current developments and future plans in their organizations, which in turn may lead to various forms of collaboration.

156. This spontaneous bottom-up pattern is very natural and can be very effective. At the same time, it is somewhat fragile and unpredictable. Even with a modest staff turnover, it is difficult to maintain organizational continuity in such efforts – personal connections and trust take time to develop and grow. Also, limited financial means for some organizations make it difficult to ensure continuous participation of their representatives in the Learning Managers Forum, which thus reduces opportunities for collaboration to

³⁸ EMERGE is a collaborative programme that includes ILO, ITU, OCHA, OHCHR, UNAIDS, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNOG, UNSSC, WHO and WIPO.

emerge from this kind of professional networking. In addition, it seems, from anecdotal evidence collected in the interviews, that bureaucratic procedures often slow down or discourage collaborative efforts.

3.4.1. Areas in which cooperation can be enhanced

157. Enhanced institutionalized inter-agency collaboration on learning can include, where appropriate, systematic coordination in: (a) the definition of learning strategies and content development; (b) quality assurance for the learning curricula of cross-thematic or inter-disciplinary topics; (c) efforts to optimize pedagogical approaches and system-wide needs assessment; (d) mutual recognition of learning activities; (e) pooling of resources, common rosters of experts, joint partnerships with universities, etc.

158. From the learners' perspective, there is no system-wide platform or repository with a comprehensive catalogue of United Nations system courses, produced internally or customized by external providers. From the providers' perspective, there is no (formal or informal) network of learning providers, which would allow for a more structured approach towards a coherent and efficient use of learning resources.³⁹

159. With the exception of some mandatory courses, there is no mutual recognition of completed courses for staff moving between different organizations in the United Nations system. Staff are thus often required to retake classes and online courses multiple times to ensure compliance with their organization's requirements. Beyond the very practical utility of individual training to jointly agreed standards and recognition, the organizations might also explore whether and how mutual recognition of courses could provide a path to better integrated human resources management.

160. In the same vein, monitoring and evaluation are conducted at the organizational level with little opportunity for uptake or coordinated reflection and action at a system-wide level, although the challenges faced are similar. Monitoring is essential in an inter-agency shared learning environment, particularly when it represents a change from past experiences and sheds light on the transformations organizations may have gone through with regard to their learning ecosystem. While good practices exist, they are often limited to informal information sharing by individual units and lack consistency or interoperable data at a system-wide level.

161. New technologies, and in particular their numerous e-learning applications, are not only an opportunity, but also a standing invitation for coordination and convergence in the United Nations system. Yet, in this respect too, the potential of new technologies for inter-agency work is vastly underutilized. Opportunities for more efficiency, less spending, more coherence and less duplication are lost. The secretariats of various organizations are not the only ones responsible for pursuing their own goals in an isolated manner. Member States may also overlook the potential offered by new technologies for a more efficient use of their assessed and voluntary contributions. Rather than fund individual undertakings, they might, where appropriate, call for more frequent system-wide vision and action.

162. Against this background, some good practices in knowledge sharing at an informal, collegial level should be highlighted. The Learning Managers Forum, facilitated by UNSSC, against a participating fee, has done significant work in terms of information sharing, harmonizing practices and identifying challenging and emerging trends with regard to learning. The Geneva Learning Managers Network takes advantage of the number and diversity of multilateral actors (United Nations organizations, together with others such as the World Trade Organization, the Gavi Alliance and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria) to organize regular meetings where they exchange experience or invite learning service providers from academia or the private sector.

163. The learning managers interviewed for this review almost unanimously highlighted the importance of such networks and meetings for knowledge sharing regarding content development, procurement challenges, feedback on services, etc.

164. It should be noted, however, that participation in these forum meetings is informal and subject to budget availability. Knowledge sharing is not institutionally structured through a system-wide orientation towards collaboration, visibility and impact on decision: it depends rather on the extra efforts and initiatives taken by individuals in sharing updates. While such networks of learning managers can develop and agree on many

³⁹ With the exception of United Nations/international organizations group meeting using the CornerstoneonDemand platform, attended by Cornerstone administrators from across the United Nations system, which offers a venue for sharing experiences and best practices, discussing common challenges and exploring opportunities for collaboration and synergies.

professional concepts and actions touching many areas of learning, the **Inspector sees real potential in such a structured inter-agency platform to serve the needs of cost efficiency, to leverage the system-wide negotiating position when procuring learning-related goods and services, and to reduce the repetition of administrative processes carried out individually when approaching external learning providers.**

3.4.2. Joint use of resources

165. The use of courses from other United Nations organizations is reported by responding organizations. Eighteen responses indicate the use or co-development of courses with other United Nations organizations, international organizations and, in some cases, international non-governmental organizations.

166. The United Nations system presents a unique ground for further exploration of the practice of sharing resources. The proximity of organizations' missions, their shared values and their partially shared infrastructure could provide a fertile ground for the sharing of learning materials at system-wide level, in order to make the development of learning programmes more efficient. The use of granular learning would allow for easy adaptation to adjust programmes to each organization's specificities, while avoiding some duplication of work.

167. If the idea of a shared learning "marketplace" is ever put into practice, one of its future iterations might be to provide a shared repository of learning materials, available for re-use by other participating organizations. One part of the repository, containing non-sensitive information, could also be made available to the broader public, as open learning resources about the United Nations system and its work.

168. Co-development of learning agendas and programmes has a clear potential to bring more coherence and reduce learning costs (or to provide more learning for the same money – another way to overcome budgetary limitations). To maximize the opportunities and benefits of collaborative efforts among the United Nations organizations, the following direct measures could be considered:

- (a) **Increasing the authority and influence of learning managers' networks.** This could include reviewing the existing networks and forums and establishing a more inclusive and continuous form of exchange to nurture a stronger community of practice;
- (b) **Creating a system-wide "information board/marketplace" for learning programmes.** This could be a lightly structured and formalized online space to provide continuous updates on learning needs, major plans and developments in progress for all organizations. Its utility would be in facilitating the continuous (not only annual) monitoring of opportunities for collaboration and in making it easier (and more obvious) for newcomers among learning professionals to grasp the system-wide dynamics;
- (c) **Reducing administrative barriers to collaboration among United Nations organizations** by updating the learning policies, procurement rules and operating procedures relevant for collaboration in planning and developing learning programmes, as well as encouraging a more open exchange of learning programmes.

169. Other measures that are examined elsewhere in the present report could be added to this list. Some of them can be achieved through the adoption of organization policies on learning (establishing a common framework, mandating a virtual community of learning professionals, agreeing upon and implementing joint system-wide learning programmes, etc.) or the more efficient use of technology-based learning tools (a learning information exchange platform; portable learning e-certificates; an optional learning platform for common use; standards for the interconnection of learning platforms; open e-learning programmes).

3.4.3. System-wide learning programmes

170. The review found strong support for system-wide (conceived to be used at a system-wide level) and/or shared programmes (conceived by a leading organization but useful at a system-wide level). Of 33 responses, 30 favour system-wide programmes, while the remaining three remain neutral. These expressions of support are accompanied by substantive comments and ideas.

171. However, it should be noted that there is no agreement on the scope, degree or priority of standardized system-wide learning programmes. Some organizations, while approving a (limited) set of shared

programmes, are cautious of any over-application of this approach and reiterate the need for agency-specific programmes.

172. Among the many positive responses, the Inspector found two emerging standpoints on a more systematic approach for the way forward. One could be treated as a “soft” approach, which is in favour of more open information exchange about learning developments and would leave it mostly to the individual organizations to decide when to cooperate and on which programmes; the other is a “**systematic**” or “**hard**” approach that seems to favour a clearly defined core set of system-wide programmes, with some provisions for optional sharing of more specific programmes.

173. In terms of the themes and topics of standardized system-wide learning programmes, there seems to be considerable convergence on the top priorities: management and leadership.

174. Most responses to the JIU questionnaire on this topic seem to assume that online programmes would be shared, while only a few specifically mention face-to-face programmes. This is perhaps natural, as the sharing of online programmes is much easier to implement and incurs little additional costs. However, there is no reason why face-to-face programmes should not be based on some common standards of efficiency and focus. Their harmonization and even standardization, where feasible, may encompass joint training-of-trainers activities.

175. Lastly, as the responses from ILO highlight, there are two practical aspects to possible standardized or harmonized system-wide programmes. The first is the design and content of such programmes. The second is the **delivery** of standardized programmes, which does not have to be centralized and standardized even when the content is standardized. For example, an online programme could be developed as a standard system-wide programme, but delivered independently by some organizations, through their own learning platforms, rather than through a single centralized system. To some extent, this is already a practice with a few online courses – for example, the BSAFE course is currently available on several learning platforms in the system. The compatibility of online formats, connectivity of learning platforms and portability of standardized learning certificates should be considered as part of an overall solution.

Customization

176. One prevailing idea among learning managers is to have a provision for customizing standardized courses for the specific needs of organizations. For example, the WFP respondents propose a common pool of learning solutions, whereby agencies can also opt to customize these shared resources with agency-specific procedures and practices. Similarly, the suggestions from ILO include sharing of “core materials”, to which organizations can add a “wrapper” at the beginning of a course, or a complete module, to address their own specificities in areas where they differ in value statements, definitions and policies.

177. While this would seem to be a reasonable measure to increase the flexibility of standardized programmes and address the concerns about prescriptive programmes that do not take account of the specificities of organizations, such concerns should be handled with care. Organizations often naturally tend to be subjective and overemphasize their own specificities, and might resort to customization where it is not objectively justified. This could result in a plethora of customized versions of standardized programmes, nullifying the savings resulting from standardization and making it difficult to maintain and update the programmes.

178. To avoid excessive customization, there should be a clear set of shared rules regarding customization and branching of versions. The proposal by ILO to limit customization to only adding a preface content or completely separate modules where necessary, without modifying the core shared content, could be a good starting point for rules defining the possible customization of shared courses, while allowing constructive flexibility.

Governance and ownership

179. In the discussion around more standardized and prescriptive approaches to programmes of system-wide relevance, one critical issue is the allocation of responsibility for, and ownership of, such programmes to particular agencies. Some ready-made programmes available on the market might be appropriate for use in the United Nations system. However, the majority of programmes would probably have to be adapted or created within the system. For some topics, the content expertise is clearly situated with particular agencies

(for example, the BSAFE programme was created by the United Nations Department for Safety and Security), but for other topics this may not be completely obvious.

180. The response from UNFPA suggests that joint programmes could be co-created by volunteering agencies, which would also allocate internal learning budgets to the creation of such programmes (while delivery would be financed differently).

181. Another approach is implied in the response from UN-Women, which recognizes the current leading role of UNSSC in creating shared programmes and takes note of similar activities by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and OCHA. It proposes that a leading agency with specific core funding should be designated as the “owner” of system-wide programmes.

182. An unambiguous governance scheme could thus be developed to facilitate and support an efficient and widely accepted system for creating and maintaining standardized system-wide programmes.

183. If a “softer” approach is taken, with the aim of greatly facilitating **co-development and sharing of courses** but not defining standardized system-wide programmes, its focus could be on efficient information exchange and setting standards for developing learning programmes.

184. To facilitate a process for the creation of shared and system-wide programmes, UNHCR suggests as a first step, participation in a **virtual community** as a first step:

‘...where we can share our needs in the short and medium-term; also share the projects that are in the pipeline. This approach would provide information on what programmes we can use from other agencies for the benefit of our users, and, on the other hand, avoid duplicating programmes and budget. This would also encourage inter-agency participation in content development.’

185. Such a system-wide virtual community of learning professionals would need a facilitating entity and some modest resources for it to carry out its mandate. **Such a community of learning professionals should include but not be limited to human resources officials.**

186. The Inspector firmly encouraged the valorization of such a community of learning professionals. Moreover, such a community should not be created from scratch. The existing and dynamic networks of learning managers can continue their collective work, but they need more institutional recognition and support and their voice should be heard by the governing bodies and executive heads of organizations.

187. Not surprisingly, a few organizations feel that prescribed system-wide standardized training would reduce their independence in setting their learning agenda and designing learning programmes. However, other than reflecting traditional lines justifying silos, they provide little evidence as to why and how more system-wide coherence, coordination and convergence would reduce their independence and trigger negative consequences.

188. Coherence, coordination and convergence in learning policies and practices at the United Nations system-wide level can also be improved by increasing the visibility, role and authority of the learning managers and learning professionals in decision-making processes. In that respect, the Inspector welcomes the idea of a new standing working group on learning and development, as part of the Human Resources Network under the auspices of CEB.

Cost sharing

189. A more challenging issue is the funding. Several organizations (particularly the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)) propose that the cost of developing and delivering standardized training be shared among the participating organizations, proportionally to the number of learners that they enrol in the programmes. UNOPS proposes that this could be done through per-user license payments. IMO, UNIDO, WHO and several others propose cost sharing based on the number of staff participating in joint programmes. A number of organizations (for example, UNRWA) expect that standardized training should be provided for free to small organizations with insufficient funding.

190. More specifically, some organizations (for example, UN-Women) recall the central role that UNSSC should play in delivering standardized training and suggest that it should dispose of **core funding** to fulfil this role and not operate a cost-recovery fee-based principle, which makes their programmes unaffordable to

a number of organizations. Under such circumstances, the core funding should provide sufficient seed money, which would be matched by funding from beneficiary organizations to fully cover the relevant costs.

191. Similar suggestions are made by WFP (a central contribution augmented by pay-per-use fees) and ILO (“a central body” and a subscription-based approach).

192. Some organizations count on the ease of copying and distributing digital content without incurring additional costs. For example, ESCAP responds that existing (online) courses, such as mandatory training on ethics or human rights, could be made available more broadly without additional costs.

193. The Inspector is encouraged to see that not only do a majority of organizations favour the idea of system-wide learning programmes, they also suggest possible funding mechanisms, ranging from cost sharing to free programmes for agencies with funding challenges.

194. The Inspector invites the learning managers of all United Nations system organizations to consider the use of system-wide funding schemes that could realize economies of scale for the further development of system-wide learning programmes and the inclusion of organizations with fewer resources.

4. Staff engagement and perception

4.1. Staff engagement

The basis of staff engagement remains insufficient

195. Most organizations consulted for the purposes of this review claim to use one method or another (staff surveys, ad-hoc consultations, learning advisory boards) to ensure that staff perceptions and perspectives are taken into account in defining organizational learning needs and aims. There is growing agreement across the system that the responsibility for learning and development should be co-owned by (a) staff and their managers, (b) human resources and learning professionals, (c) senior management and learning providers.

196. However, the review found that adequate staff engagement is often referenced mostly in relation to ad-hoc, quality and evaluation assessments conducted either occasionally or at the end of the learning activity only.

197. Two main reasons may account for limited staff engagement. The first is survey fatigue and the perception that there is a limited return on feedback in actual decision-making and learning priorities. The second is related to the lack of trust in that way that managers play their role in seeking, stimulating and rewarding staff engagement. The managers seem to pay lip service to learning, considering it a province of human resources officers.

198. Some officials also noticed that there was a tendency to consider the assessment of learning needs as a fault-finding mission only. This negative perception might also explain the low response rate of learners to surveys and evaluations. A new learning culture implies promoting learning as an aspirational and participatory tool.

199. The engagement of staff is also recognized as critical in change processes,⁴⁰ and so their active role as part of a broader learning ecosystem should not be underestimated. In fact, senior managers have a significant role to play by: (a) enhancing the visibility of learning and its overall contribution in organizational mandates, (b) ensuring that the results of staff surveys are treated in a transparent manner and feed into corporate decision-making processes, where possible and as appropriate, and (c) ensuring that, when changes are made, they are broadly communicated and credited to the staff members who instigated them. The JIU staff survey indicates that only 18 per cent of staff discuss learning expectations with their supervisors.

200. Staff engagement in determining learning needs should be treated as a continuous cycle with sustained involvement and interaction in: (a) identifying needs and informing objectives of learning content; (b) providing feedback to curriculum development, when applicable; (c) using formative evaluation during learning delivery and remaining flexible to making adjustments; and (d) improving outcome evaluation methods and tools so that staff can provide feedback in future learning design and delivery.

201. Organizations that provide incentives to ensure that managers support learning and where employees feel that learning opportunities are available and easily accessible are more likely to get good outcomes. The World Bank, for example, practices continuous feedback and iterative performance management, using ongoing communication and priority setting between staff and managers.

202. Effective management begins with the recognition that it is not enough to include learning in policy documents, unless it is conceived as an overarching commitment with the aim of achieving an agile and skilled workforce, from bottom to top. The Inspector notes with interest the efforts of many organizations (UNHCR, WIPO, WHO, WFP, UNAIDS, the United Nations Secretariat, ILO, UNDP and, in particular UNSSC) to reflect learning priorities in leadership courses for senior managers.

203. The Inspector recommends that the executive heads of the United Nations organizations should take action to ensure systematic, continuous and collaborative staff engagement in priority setting, learning-needs assessment and learning delivery.

⁴⁰ See JIU/REP/2019/4, Change management in United Nations system organizations.

Learning is not adequately embedded in the performance management system

204. When asked about tracking and addressing learning needs, almost all organizations refer to the development plans and training compliance in the staff performance management system. Views differ considerably on whether it is the responsibility of operations managers or human resources managers to monitor and comply with staff learning plans. Some operations managers claim that they cannot be held accountable, as they do not have separate funds to address learning needs.

205. Moreover, the individual motivation of the staff may not be aligned with the overall landscape of organizational needs. Staff may be motivated by career aspirations only, or by a genuine personal interest in improving their professional skills and knowledge horizons. Some may be passive or consider that the organization should provide a learning environment based on incentives and career rewards. Others may be proactive and claim opportunities and recognition. Those two very different perspectives must be handled carefully to ensure both efficiency of learning and accountability in the use of learning resources.

206. Joint responsibility of managers and staff in planning learning priorities can foster ownership of learning outcomes and accountability. A better connection between learning and performance management is an area identified during the review as posing a significant challenge to most organizations, irrespective of the availability of financial resources. Many organizations do not link performance incentives to their learning programmes, which increases the risk of their learning investments not being sufficiently used and appreciated.

207. The performance management system itself was evaluated poorly by its users. Concerns specifically pointed to: (a) the lack of linkages between performance management and other components of talent management, such as recruitment and career development, and (b) the perceptions of managers and staff that the performance management system is too mechanical and transactional when it comes to learning. As a result, performance is often documented in a vacuum without any actual follow-up due to lack of understanding about responsibilities among staff, operation managers and human resources officers. This finding was also confirmed by previous audits of human resources and United Nations performance management.⁴¹ In the same vein, only 14 per cent of the respondents to the JIU staff survey were very satisfied with the planning of learning and development in relation with the performance appraisal process, while 25 per cent were very dissatisfied.

208. The review identified only four learning management systems that are sufficiently connected in any form with e-performance systems and staff learning plans (ILO, WFP, WIPO and WHO). Similarly, previous evaluations of workforce planning are not used to inform targeted recruitment to meet organizational needs, as recruitment and career development are not necessarily tied to performance. Performance information is not used for career development. Information on staff members' training and development efforts is not typically assessed when considering their career progression.

209. The Office of Human Resources reported that a comprehensive learning needs assessment was undertaken in 2017 with a view to connecting learning solutions with organizational priorities effectively. The assessment was meant to help managers to identify priorities and cross-cutting needs and make more strategic use of learning resources. While significant efforts were invested in the assessment, it remains unclear whether and how the recommendations were acted upon by organizations in the United Nations Secretariat.

210. As emphasized, efficient learning implies a triple responsibility: it must be self-driven by staff, manager-supported and organization-enabled. In that equation, the role of managers is essential. Implementation of the following recommendation will contribute to a more coherent reflection of learning activities in the overall talent management framework.

Recommendation 4

The executive heads of United Nations organizations should take the actions they deem appropriate to better integrate staff learning plans into their respective performance assessments and to ensure that managers are also held accountable for implementation.

⁴¹ Office of Internal Oversight Services, "Evaluation of the Department of Management-Office of Human Resources Management", 6 March 2018.

4.2. Staff perception

211. A perception survey is obviously a subjective exercise and its results should be taken as such. However, the importance of human capital in any organization, in particular in the United Nations system, is fundamental. According to recent research, “organizations today are increasingly judged on the basis of their relationships with their workers”.⁴² Therefore, the perceptions of staff about learning policies and practices are also important. This is all the more valid for the present review, with its key focus on staff learning.

212. To complement the information collected from official corporate sources, JIU conducted a staff perception survey during the first quarter of 2020. Twenty-seven participating organizations disseminated the survey and 9,564 staff members responded. Among the respondents, 3 per cent were at the level of director and above, 39 per cent were at P levels and 30 per cent were at GS levels. The remaining respondents represented field service and national officers, short-term contractors, and others. Over half of respondents (57 per cent) stated that they had managerial responsibilities.

213. One part of the survey explored the perception of staff of the access to learning opportunities, their engagement in the assessment of needs, motivational factors and the degree of satisfaction with the quality and relevance of the learning solutions provided.

214. The other part of the survey solicited views on the new skills needed by staff and managers that could be acquired and developed through traditional and technology-based forms of learning, asking about:

- (a) The most significant training areas for the development of staff for the next years;
- (b) The most important soft skills that should be developed by the staff of the United Nations;
- (c) The abilities that are the scarcest among the skills of the managers, at present.

215. Some results of the survey have been integrated in the pertinent sections of the present report in more specific contexts. The remaining findings were summarized in two categories: a) the views expressed in response to the multiple-choice questions; b) the most significant views expressed in open-ended responses.

a) Main findings: views of the majority

216. The degree of satisfaction of the staff with respect to learning activities in which they have participated are synthesized as follows:

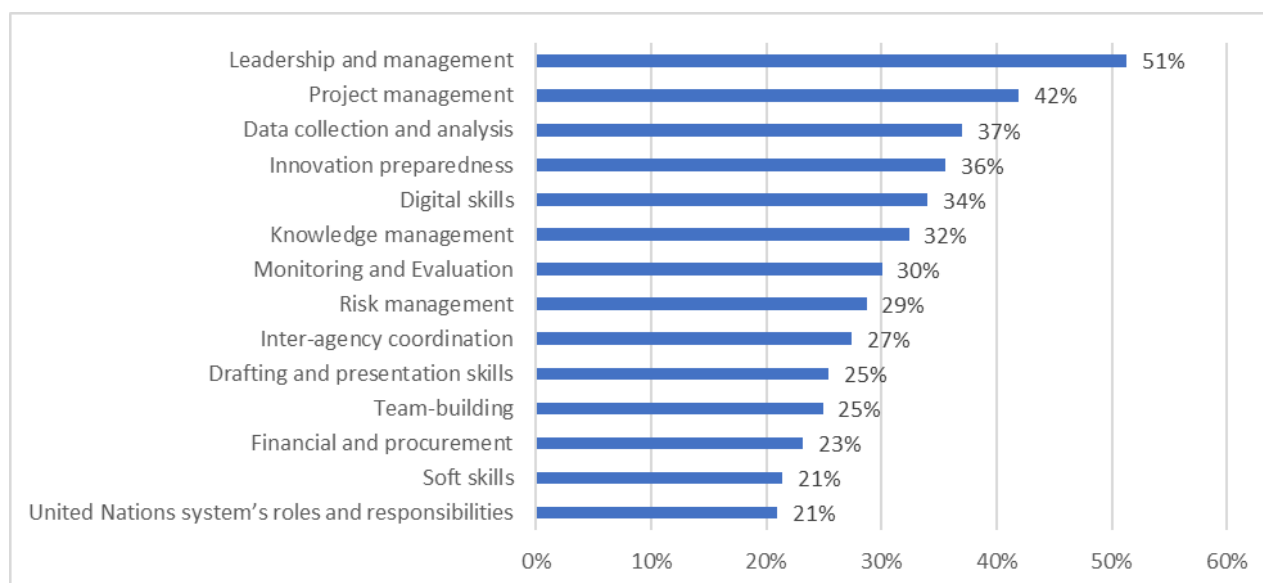
- (a) Quality of learning activities: overall, 11 per cent of the staff rated the learning activities as outstanding and 60 per cent as good. For 20 per cent of respondents the quality was average. Those partly or not satisfied remained a minority;
- (b) Access to learning provided by other organizations in the United Nations system should be improved: despite an expansion of communication means, more than half of the staff believe that identifying and acceding to learning opportunities offered by organizations other than their own is difficult (38 per cent) or very difficult (13 per cent);
- (c) Mandatory training is relevant enough: 42 per cent of the respondents consider the mandatory training relevant for their current work and 22 per cent see it as very relevant;
- (d) The workplace does not offer sufficient support: the staff feel that they are not supported at all (17 per cent) or just partly supported (54 per cent) in terms of tools and resources available for on-going learning needs;
- (e) Mentoring should be improved: 23 per cent of the respondents are very dissatisfied and 43 per cent only partly satisfied with the mentoring received from supervisors and more experienced peers. Only 22 per cent are very satisfied while 12 per cent have no opinion, presumably because they did not feel they benefited from mentoring.

217. The most important training areas: The survey respondents were asked to name the training areas that they considered the most significant for their professional development in the near future. Leadership and

⁴² Deloitte, “2018 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends. The rise of the social enterprise”.

management, project management, data collection and analysis, innovation preparedness, and digital skills came on top of their preferences, as shown in figure 13 below.

Figure 13 – The most significant training areas for professional development



218. At the top of the list, the Inspector notes a reasonably predictable mix of traditional learning areas, such as “leadership and management”, “project management” and “monitoring and evaluation”, along with topics associated with a new learning culture, as “innovation preparedness” and “digital skills”.

219. At the same time, the survey indicates that there is still more work to do on learning areas that broaden the professional horizon of the United Nations beyond traditional silos, towards more collaboration and a system-wide vision. The relatively low scores of inter-agency coordination, teamwork and the roles and responsibilities of the United Nations system as a whole are quite significant and they justify the need for more coordination and convergence of learning programmes at system-wide level.

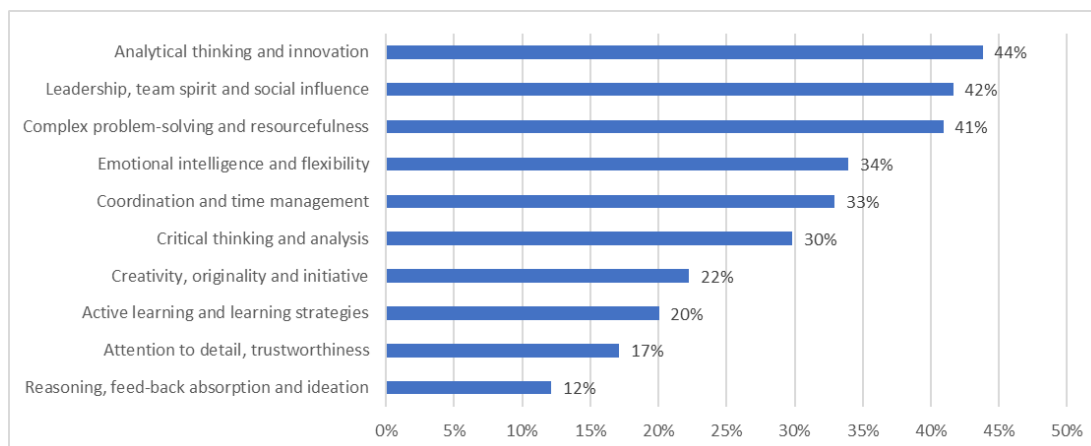
220. The apparent low level of interest in the soft skills that are necessary to transform the United Nations entities into agile organizations indicates the need for more work on understanding the transformations required to keep up the operational relevance of the United Nations system in a very competitive and dynamic environment.

Box 4 – The agile organization

The agile organization is a concept that describes a new balance between stability and dynamism. The prevailing traditional form of organization is static, siloed, with structural hierarchy, designed primarily for stability. The goals and decisions flow down the hierarchy. The structure is strong, but often rigid and slow moving. In contrast, agile organizations act as a network of teams that operates in rapid learning and fast decision cycles, enabled by technologies. The main feature of an agile organization is the ability to quickly and efficiently reconfigure strategies, structures, processes, people and technology. Velocity and adaptability are added to stability, allowing adaptation to volatile and uncertain environment.⁴³

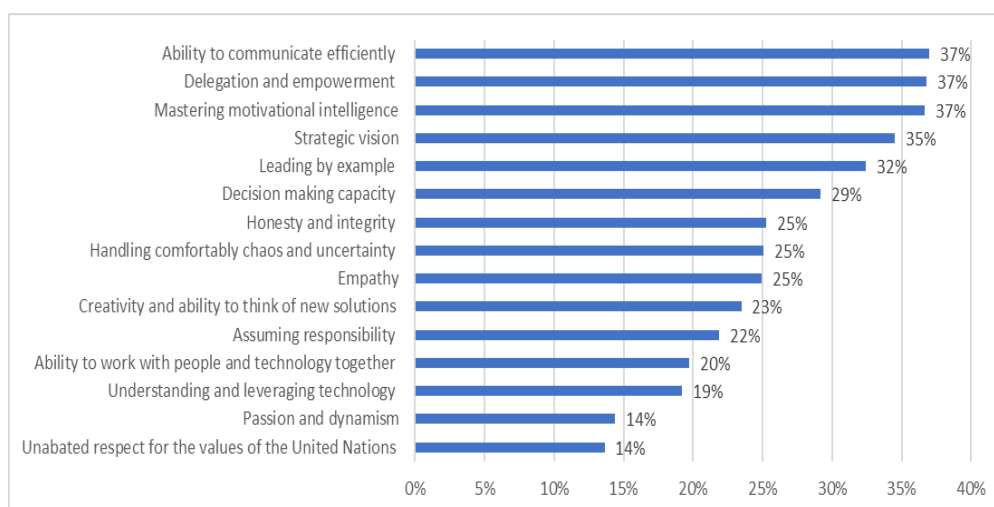
221. **Developing soft skills:** The survey went further with queries about the nature of the transformations of a new learning environment and the soft skills that are most meaningful in the United Nations context. As there is no exhaustive and universally agreed package of soft skills, the respondents were invited to choose among 10 such skills. Innovation-related skills came at the top of the preferences, followed by leadership, team spirit, social influence and complex problem-solving and resourcefulness.

⁴³ See: McKinsey&Company, The 5 Trademarks of Agile Organizations, December 2017.

Figure 14 – The most meaningful soft skills in the United Nations context

222. The Inspector recognizes that any hierarchy of such soft skills is subjective. However, he observes that, for the most part, the current configurations of learning curricula are far from reflecting the soft skills that appear to be in high demand. The Inspector invites learning managers across the United Nations system to reflect upon the learning solutions that might serve the development of such soft skills or other factors that have not been reflected in the survey.

What supervisors and managers need to know: The survey offered staff the opportunity to look up their professional hierarchy and indicate the abilities that their supervisors and managers need more of.

Figure 15 – Abilities of supervisors and managers that are most needed

223. The Inspector invites the learning managers to consider how to include the development of those skills in the leadership and management programmes. The managers themselves should undertake an exercise in introspection. As 53 per cent of the respondents are managers, presumably some introspection has already started. Indeed, effective leaders are responsible not only for stimulating a new culture of learning in their organizations but for acquiring new competencies themselves including “leading through change, embracing ambiguity and uncertainty and understanding digital, cognitive and artificial intelligence-driven technologies to get there”.⁴⁴

b) The open question: listening to the dissenting views

224. The current era of communication across any demarcation lines in a hyperconnected world has propelled a shift in power from collective structures to individuals. From that perspective, even the statistical power of numbers is challenged. A critical mass in any statistics, including those resulting from the survey, brings relevance and credibility, but it may not fully reflect reality. The significance of minority or dissenting

⁴⁴ Deloitte, “2019 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends. Leading the social enterprise: Reinvent with a human focus.”

views may also be useful. That is why, in addition to the multiple choice questions, the JIU survey also contained one open question for various other remarks and comments.

225. Not surprisingly, some of the views collected in this way did not coincide with the opinions as assessed by percentages noted in the previous section. However, some opinions are worth noting, as they revealed nuances that could not be perceived from the multiple choice answers only. In addition, they brought up issues which, by design, were not covered by the survey.

226. Anecdotal, extreme or circumstantial views were not processed. A total of 1,400 responses were clustered and analysed around the following generic issues:

- (a) Learning opportunities and choices available to staff;
- (b) Motivational factors, accountability and the reflection of learning in staff performance;
- (c) The role of managers and supervisors in the allocation of learning resources among staff members.

227. The main remarks on learning opportunities and role of managers are summarized below:

I. Learning opportunities and choices available and motivation for learning.

- (a) While all the respondents acknowledge the importance of providing staff with learning opportunities, many believe that, in reality, these are rather uneven and unfairly distributed and training opportunities do not match the present United Nations changing environment and various reform processes;
- (b) The lack of a strategic vision or planning for learning triggers a feeling of confusion among staff with respect to priority-setting and the availability of time resources;
- (c) Learning records are poorly connected with performance management and promotion opportunities: learning should be aligned with desired capacity development for enhanced performance with clear accountability for results;
- (d) Further inter-agency training opportunities on a wide range of topics (including on innovation and technology) would be a valuable addition to the current training offer;
- (e) Most learning acquired in formal learning events fails to be transferred back to the workplace and thus proves ineffective;
- (f) Hierarchical culture, insufficient leadership and empowerment affect the motivation of staff to learn
- (g) Learning solutions provided are sometimes unplanned and lack sufficient evidence-based needs;
- (h) Learning strategies are weakly connected with the challenges posed by organizational change and are not adequately utilized as a motivational tool;
- (i) Workload is a key-inhibiting factor from both a subjective and an objective perspective. Very often the heavy workload does not allow time for learning activities. In other circumstances, certain subconscious managerial mind-sets unduly extrapolate some personal circumstances and discourage staff from engaging in learning;⁴⁵
- (j) Most mandatory training is not real training, but an accumulation of information, often irrelevant. Due to its mandatory nature, it has become a formality without real impact. Because of the workload and the time constraints, mandatory training is completed to the detriment of substantive training;
- (k) Beyond administration-related subjects (procurement, project management), there is scant learning offer related to substantive skills; learning on technology-related topics is badly needed to improve digital literacy, save resources spent on contractors, and develop internal expertise in a sustainable way over the longer term;

⁴⁵ For example, interest in a new training programme may be interpreted as insufficient workload or interest in work.

- (l) Staff that join the organizations at an early stage need more substantive training and guidance; staff that were hired for their professional skills should be supported to keep up with new developments in their disciplines.

228. The Inspector notes that most of the above remarks fall within the responsibility of all managers at all levels. The criticisms were made particularly emphatically in the cluster of responses referring specifically to managers.

II. The role of managers and supervisors in the allocation of learning resources.

- (a) Learning is not viewed as an integral part of organizational effectiveness and career development. Learning happens occasionally or “by luck”, without an institutionalized long-term plan in support of broader human resources reforms aimed at achieving an agile and mobile workforce.
- (b) Managers are often obliged to consider learning only in response to the short-term needs of the unit/department, without having an adequate understanding of long-term organizational requirements and strategic priorities.
- (c) The organizations should do more to: empower the staff by systematically designing career paths, which itself would entail an incentive/performance evaluation structure, mentoring and continuous learning; and enhance the standards of management and the accountability framework for the use of financial and time resources devoted to learning.
- (d) It can be difficult or impossible to record non-United Nations courses in the learning management systems, which means that the learning efforts of some staff go unrecorded and/or ignored by managers.
- (e) The administration of learning, when it follows the human resources reporting lines is conducted at the expense of broader opportunities in technical/substantive topics necessary for improving performance in functional areas.
- (f) There is no meritocracy in the selection of staff attending training activities and there is a limited understanding of the reasoning behind the selection of learning topics.
- (g) The learning needs of general service staff are consistently neglected and undue priority is put on the learning opportunities given to international staff at the detriment national staff.
- (h) Favouritism, abuse, personal considerations and lack of accountability are cited as factors that sometimes distort the decisions of the managers on the allocation of learning solutions, which demotivates staff and fuels a state of lassitude.

229. The Inspector believes that managers should seek to improve these negative perceptions about the role of the learning and operations managers by:

- (a) Developing and using clear and transparent criteria about the allocation of learning resources;
- (b) Consulting the staff in an open, systematic and participatory way about learning needs, priorities and opportunities;
- (c) Recognizing and appreciating the individual efforts of learners outside the formal learning framework;
- (d) Acquiring and using coaching skills.

Note: one of the respondents noted with discontent: “*If I participate in any learning and development, it's because I proactively seek, identify, and request it*”. The Inspector believes that indeed the organizations have the responsibility to create an environment that stimulates and rewards learning efforts. Nevertheless, the organizational environment cannot and should not replace the personal individual motivation, interest, and effort for learning. A statement like the one quoted above should be the credo of a majority of staff.

230. The Inspector acknowledges that learning responsibilities should be shared by both managers and individual staff members. Fairness is essential in the allocation of learning resources, whether scarce or sufficient:

- (a) **Distributive fairness:** the allocation of resources must be fair and take into account all individual needs, on the one hand, and the need to make efficient use of the limited resources of an organization, on the other;
- (b) **Procedural fairness:** the process of allocation must be fair and the opportunities equal for all members of the staff, including the silent majority;
- (c) **Interactional fairness:** everyone must be treated honestly before, during and after the decision-making process, irrespective of the nature of the relationships with individual claimants;
- (d) **Sustainable fairness:** there must be adequate resources left at later stages to cater for the needs of other staff members.

231. **The Inspector recommends that all managers ensure the scrupulous application of distributive, procedural, interactional and sustainable fairness and transparency in the allocation of resources allotted to learning.**

232. At the same time, in the absence of a genuine interest in learning on the part of individual staff members, learning may turn into a formalistic, ineffective and inefficient exercise. Staff members are also expected to make individual, proactive and innovative efforts to engage in learning and self-improvement. Therefore, **the Inspector recommends that all learning managers should endeavour to stimulate, recognize and reward the personal motivation of staff who engage in continuous and collaborative learning and take leadership for learning outcomes.**

233. In the same vein, the Inspector notes that the Noblemaire principle,⁴⁶ inherited by the United Nations from the League of Nations, with respect to setting the salaries of international civil servants was based upon a fundamental justification. That was the assumption that the highest salaries paid to international public servants remunerated high-level competence, university degrees, advanced knowledge in the respective areas of expertise and the linguistic and other abilities of the staff.⁴⁷ Individual staff members therefore also have the duty to learn on their own account, as presumably their salaries also cover the duty to learn and maintain the highest level of competence and abilities.

⁴⁶ The Noblemaire principle was part of the concept of the modern international civil service, first established in the International Secretariat of the League of Nations and in the International Labour Office (1920-1921). The name comes from Georges Noblemaire, the chairman of the Committee that proposed that the salaries of the staff of the League of Nations should be based on those of the highest-paid national administrations.

⁴⁷ See Michael Ogwezzy, "Noblemaire Principle in the Context of International Civil Service", *Cosmopolitan Law Journal*, vol. 4, No. 2 (2016).

Part Two

A new learning environment: technological opportunities

5. E-learning platforms

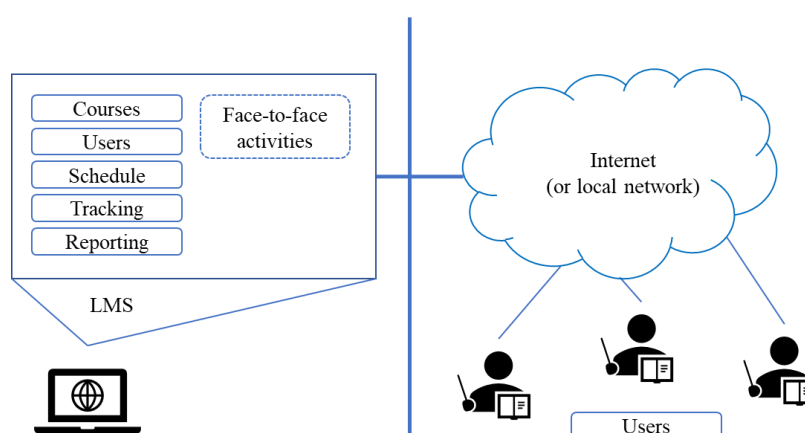
234. The dynamic nature and the constant improvement and diversification of e-learning and other technology-supported learning solutions make them indispensable in any strategic vision on learning, whether at individual or organizational level. Therefore, the questions of how e-learning platforms are currently used in the United Nations system and how they should be used are addressed in depth, for the first time, in the present report.

235. For the purpose of the report, we use the term “learning platform” in a very broad sense, as encompassing the whole range of different platforms whose main function is learning or learning support, whether they support all the core features of learning management and delivery or only partial and complementary subsets of learning functions.

5.1. Reasons for using e-learning platforms

236. The review found a variety of online learning platforms currently being used by United Nations organizations. Most of the organizations use a learning management system as the core software platform through which learning is administered and managed, online training is delivered and blended and face-to-face learning is supported.

Figure 16 – Basic learning management system functions



237. The main reasons why organizations use e-learning can be grouped in two categories. The first relates to the difficulties that often make face-to-face programmes impractical or impossible:

- (a) The specific needs of field offices and units that operate under difficult conditions;
- (b) The cost of organizing face-to-face learning programmes in many locations around the world;
- (c) The time frame for the delivery of learning programmes when they cannot be delivered simultaneously in many different locations;
- (d) The fact that bringing dispersed staff to the headquarters or regional centres means interruption of their work (not always possible) and incurs additional costs.

238. The second category concerns the specific comparative advantages of e-learning. Responses to the questionnaire indicate a wide variety of perceived advantages, but most organizations agree on the top two reasons: global accessibility (reaching widespread employees) and cost effectiveness.

Global accessibility

239. The capacity of e-learning to reach a global audience and a widespread workforce distributed across different time zones is unparalleled in traditional face-to-face forms of learning. For organizations with a workforce that is geographically widely distributed, this is an important factor in deciding to design and deliver e-learning programmes.

240. From the perspective of the United Nations, rolling out an e-learning programme that can be accessed from any location with some form of connectivity overcomes many of the above difficulties. The programmes become instantly available in all the locations around the world where an organization is present. Such programmes are also typically designed in ways that allow more flexibility: learners can access them in smaller blocks, avoiding major disruptions to their work. Most of the programmes are also asynchronous in nature, so that there are few learning activities with a fixed timeline. Accessibility via mobile devices also increases the ubiquity of learning and the autonomy of the learner.

241. However, the following caveats should be considered:

- (a) In spite of the progress in global connectivity, there are still cases and circumstances in which stable online access to learning is not possible or effective. Some organizations are taking this into account by looking at the learning platforms that support the offline availability of learning resources. This means that the programmes can be downloaded onto a computer or mobile device and used offline, even when there is no reliable network connection;
- (b) The e-learning format that is easiest to produce and quickest to distribute and use throughout the United Nations system is self-paced e-learning. However, this may not necessarily be the most suitable format for topics that require knowledge to be actively constructed by the learner, which calls for interaction with other learners and facilitators. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring that e-learning formats are chosen in line with learning objectives and that adequate care is given to the proper pedagogical design. Language accessibility is also an important factor to examine.

5.1.2. Cost effectiveness

242. Cost effectiveness has been an argument in favour of using e-learning from its early days. Such expectations were fuelled not only by the enthusiasm on the part of academia and the technology sector, but also by the need of large organizations and structures to find a pragmatic way of reducing costs while delivering uniform training. For organizations with tens of thousands of trainees, such savings can be used to increase the number of trainees or learning activities.

243. Cost effectiveness was cited by 23 organizations as a reason for using e-learning, but there is little information provided that would indicate a systematic and comparative analysis of e-learning costs versus other formats. While the questionnaire did not ask for an explicit comparison or a breakdown of e-learning costs, the absence of such information (including in the interviews) might point to the fact that the cost-effectiveness of e-learning is often taken for granted.

244. Cost structure. The following cost elements exist (to some extent) for conventional e-learning programmes developed for the specific needs of organizations and hosted on their learning management system (LMS) platforms, as well as for some of the newer and hybrid infrastructure configurations:

- (a) Cost of the online platform (LMS).
 - For self-hosted LMS, this includes the cost of installation and maintenance, licenses for commercial software used (unless using open-source systems), customization costs, hardware amortization and Internet connection;
 - For cloud-hosted LMS, this can include hosting fees for self-managed systems or per-user subscriptions for software-as-a-service platforms;
- (b) Cost of content design and development;
- (c) Cost of delivery – administration, support and facilitation, if provided.

245. However, the cost structure becomes more complicated with the latest cloud-based services, ready-made courses and content libraries, as shown below.

246. The conventional setup: the conventional e-learning infrastructure is based on LMS software hosted in on-premises data centres. E-learning programmes are developed in-house or outsourced, according to the needs of the organization, and then uploaded to the system and delivered on the local network or globally over the Internet.

247. LMS in the cloud: this is a small variation to the conventional setup with the server hosted in the cloud. The system is still fully controlled by the organization, which is in charge of installation and maintenance, but the infrastructure is removed from the local data centre to a cloud. This changes the overall cost structure, replacing the hardware costs with the cost of virtualized infrastructure hosting.

248. LMS as SaaS⁴⁸: a further step in the virtualization of learning platforms came with organizations relinquishing control over the server software to the companies providing LMS as a (cloud-based) service. In this model, organizations use a ready-made LMS provided by a vendor on a subscription basis. Typically, organizations pay an annual subscription fee for each user (staff member or external partner) who has access to the system. In this model, the organizations still develop their own e-learning courses and upload them to the cloud-based LMS.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

249. In recent years, online learning platforms with ready-made courses have exploded in popularity. They range from a wide choice of MOOCs on platforms like Coursera, EdX and Future Learn to business-oriented services such as Lynda.com/LinkedIn Learning. These platforms provide a learning environment in which their own ready-made courses are delivered.

250. Much of the content on leading MOOC platforms can be accessed for free. Some courses require a registration fee, while others are free unless certification is desired, in which case a course fee applies. For business-oriented platforms, however, the fees are typically charged in the form of a monthly or annual subscription for each employee granted access to the platform, which then gives unlimited access to all the courses available (the “Netflix” model).

251. The Inspector notes that the use of content platforms is rising among the participating organizations. Through this model, the costs are related to the content access and there is no explicit technical cost associated.

Integration of platforms

252. The integration of platforms may also have an impact on costs. In the early days of external content-oriented platforms, organizations wishing to use them were forced to work on two parallel tracks. On the first one, they would provide their employees with access to external platforms with ready-made content that met some of their needs. On the second track, they would continue to design and deliver their own custom-made courses on their own LMS platform to serve their other learning needs, which were not met by the standardized ready-made content. The two learning paths were separate and it was difficult or impossible to monitor learning progress or import completion information from external systems into in-house systems or human resources performance management systems.

253. However, at present the integration of internal and external learning is becoming easier. Organizations can complement their internal learning portfolio with external, ready-made programmes, while keeping track of learning progress and achievements in one place – a central LMS or other learning records store.

254. There are two prevailing emerging modalities in which this integration is implemented:

- (a) Embedding external courses into an internal LMS (whether cloud-based or self-hosted). In this scenario, external courses (for example from LinkedIn Learning) appear seamlessly among internal courses available to staff on the organization’s LMS or learning portal. Learners can start external courses in the same way as they would enrol for an internal course, and their progress and achievements are fully recorded on the organization’s internal platform. Thus, for example, WHO made LinkedIn Learning courses available on their cloud-based Cornerstone onDemand.

⁴⁸ Software as a Service, see Managing cloud computing services in the United Nations system, JIU/REP/2019/8.

This integration means that learners see the external courses in the list of programmes available on the Organization's platform and can enrol and follow the courses seamlessly within the same environment. Records of their learning achievements are also saved in the LMS. Such integration significantly extends the learning scope beyond what an organization can offer internally, in a way that simplifies access (and reduces barriers to entry) to the external courses;

- (b) Use of mixed-content cloud-based platforms. These platforms combine a catalogue of pre-loaded ready-made standard courses with the functionality of a learning platform or LMS where organizations can create or upload their own courses. Examples include LinkedIn Learning, Coopacademy and Accenture Academy. The latter is an example of a cloud-based platform with a ready-made curriculum, which allows learning paths to be customized and individual learning materials to be uploaded. It is used by the United Nations Secretariat for supply-chain training.

255. The variety of different models that mix internal and external learning platforms and content requires more careful cost estimation than in the past, when a single traditional platform model was mostly used. While more complicated, such cost calculations are still based on the core cost elements mentioned above, combined in a way that reflects the mix of platforms and content used by an organization. The paradigm change related to the use of cloud-based and subscription-based services instead of upfront capital investments, well known in the software-as-a-service world, is equally applicable to such learning services. Internal cost distribution is also important. Some organizations report that the cost of the LMS is covered by the information technology department's budget, while others have to finance the infrastructure cost of the platform from the learning budget. Organizations considering starting or expanding their e-learning programmes should take all the above into account.

256. The Inspector suggests that cost analyses should also include other contextual factors:

- (a) The cost effectiveness of e-learning does not always translate into actual savings across the board. Savings also depend on the format, context and nature of e-learning programmes;
- (b) Designing and delivering high-quality, high-engagement online programmes where participants interact with other humans can be resource-demanding and costly, but does potentially result in better learning outcomes;
- (c) Savings are made primarily where the training topic and learning objectives allow for self-study, with little interaction with other learners, and little – if any – guidance from tutors, teachers or facilitators.

5.1.3. Other relative advantages of e-learning

257. Among other reasons that organizations reported as incentives for using e-learning, the Inspector retains the following:

- (a) Flexibility: learning can happen “anytime, anywhere” as UNOPS puts it. This is potentially a great advantage of e-learning;
- (b) The vast choice: huge numbers of programmes are available through various e-learning platforms, be it from the United Nations system or globally;
- (c) The just-in-time approach: this approach allows frequent content updates, an attractive concept for organizations, as it chimes in with both the pace of the information age and the demand for United Nations organizations to be more agile. Just-in-time learning is also becoming more accessible with the availability of microlearning resources, when these correspond to emerging learning needs.

258. However, the Inspector notes that these perceived advantages do not materialize automatically. For example, flexibility presents a challenge in respect of time management. Staff should be allotted sufficient time for learning activities, within the framework of their usual workload. The development of specialized learning content, tailored to the specific needs of the moment and the context requires sufficient capacity for planning and implementation. Not all e-learning programmes can be developed rapidly, and an initial assessment should be conducted before a decision is made to develop a just-in-time programme.

259. Just-in-time learning is particularly relevant for the humanitarian sectors covered by OCHA and UNHCR, when staff work “in remote, volatile areas and have limited access to face-to-face learning opportunities”.⁴⁹

5.2. E-learning platforms currently used and their main features

Learning management systems (LMS)

Box 5 – LMS terminology

Throughout section 5, the term “Learning Management System” (LMS) is used when describing and discussing the principal e-learning platforms used by organizations. While LMS is the term most widely used when referring to such systems, some slightly different terms may also be used to describe the same type of platform. Enterprise Learning Management Systems, and Virtual Learning Environments were terms often used in the past, while some vendors label their platforms as Learning Content Management Systems.

Similarly, in recent years some vendors and analysts⁵⁰ have tagged a group of cloud-based learning platforms as Learning Experience Platforms (LEP or LXP). While some of the products in this category have a particular focus on aggregation, personalisation and content discovery, in reality a large part of this category of platforms overlaps with modern LMS platforms, which are evolving in the same direction. In many reviews and listings of LXP one can find platforms that are also marketed as LMS systems (for example Docebo and TalentLMS).

260. As previously outlined, the basic features of a LMS support hosting online courses, their content and learning activities, scheduling, enrolment, tracking of learners’ progress and generation of reports and analytics. LMS are also used to administer and support face-to-face and blended activities, hosting supplementary materials and providing additional channels of interaction for coordination or learning.

261. In addition to the basic feature set, the LMS used today increasingly support more advanced functions (often provided by separate software systems in the past). Some of the modern systems cover: certificates; surveys and polls; social learning support; competency management; e-portfolios; mentoring support; elements of talent management; and integration of external content.

Other platforms

262. Despite the trend within the industry to add more features to the core LMS, a single platform cannot always serve all the needs of an organization. Many participating organizations use additional online platforms to support or deliver learning programmes. This trend is likely to continue to grow in the future, as LMS can never fully integrate the growing diversity of learning platforms and repositories that emerge and live outside a centralized platform.

263. For example, video tutorials may be hosted outside of a LMS, on a separate platform (such as YouTube or Vimeo). An organization might also use an external platform (such as SurveyMonkey) to conduct surveys among learners and collect feedback.

264. Nine responses received from participating entities indicate the simultaneous use of 3 or more different e-learning environment options in an organization, while UNOPS reports using a total of 10, and UNDP uses 6 different platforms and content repositories. The reality is that the market of learning solutions goes beyond standard definitions and configurations. Thus it is difficult to follow a very strict categorization.

⁴⁹ Cecilia de Rosa and Jayna Johnson, “Webinar-based approaches to maximize learning and transfer good practices: case studies from the humanitarian sector”, *International Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (December 2019).

⁵⁰ Including the influential Josh Bersin Academy.

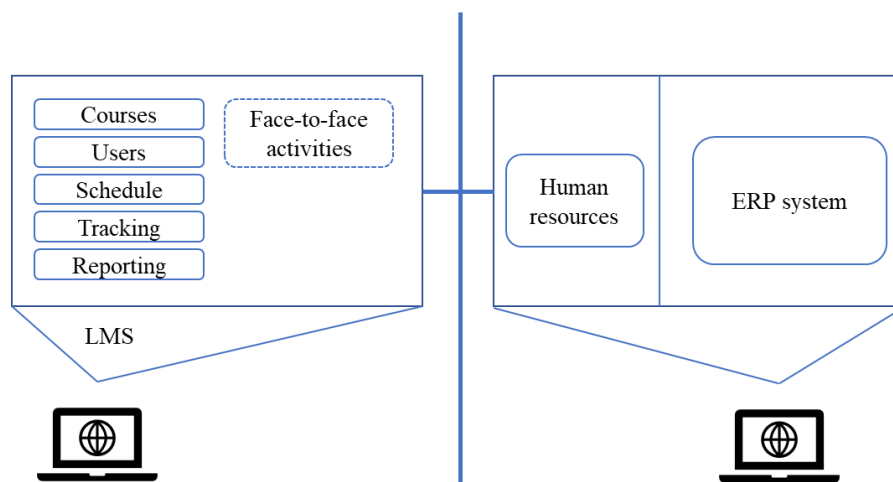
Human resources integration

265. There are two main objectives behind the emergence of modern LMS: the administration of learning and the delivery/facilitation of learning. For many early users (such as universities), the administration of learning alone was an important application of information technology, the aim being to make the process more efficient. From planning and cataloguing courses and facilitating/recording enrolment to documenting assignments and recording assessments, the use of LMS facilitated automation of the process and reduction of the administrative burden, especially for organizations with thousands of learners.

266. In the United Nations, the human resources departments are typically charged with overseeing staff learning, normally as part of a broader staff and talent development framework, going well beyond the purely administrative function. In that context, ability to connect learning activities with other human resources functions and records becomes important for improving the workflow and the efficiency of the system.

267. At the same time, human resources applications are often part of bigger enterprise resource planning software systems, although they sometimes function as stand-alone applications. This leads to some variations in how LMS are connected to the rest of human resources records and functions. For example, staff learning records could be stored in a module that belongs to an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system or a human resources application, while a LMS is primarily used to deliver courses.

Figure 17 – Connection between a learning management system and a human resources system



268. Connecting the two software systems for automatic exchange of staff data may require additional effort, if one (or both) of them does not support common standard protocols and is practically locked into a proprietary niche. For this reason, some organizations have decided to use a LMS from the same vendor as their ERP system or a module forming part of the ERP system that they use. However, vendors of ERP systems are not generally known to provide the best LMS software, so this mainly leads to a compromise, in which case it may be impossible to apply a best-of-breed approach.

269. In order to be able to use a LMS that best fits the needs of an organization, **the Inspector recommends to the learning managers that one of the criteria for the selection of both ERP systems and LMS should be their ability to integrate well and exchange data on learning activities, including evaluation.**

Authoring tools

270. Another important technology used in e-learning is an authoring tool. For the United Nations system, authoring tools are important for content management, as they can allow compatibility of platforms and stimulate co-creation and content sharing. LMS platforms often have no specific, or only a very rudimentary, functionality for compiling and producing content and packaging it for online distribution.

271. Many e-learning courses (especially those designed as self-paced courses) depend on multimedia content, which should be packaged in a way that is suitable for delivery as an e-learning resource. Authoring tools are needed to make it possible to import, record and edit audio tracks, add and manipulate video recordings, add different forms of quizzes or group slides/scenes and use more sophisticated sequencing logic (with conditional progress through the learning content).

272. The most widely used authoring tools (such as Articulate Storyline and Adobe Captivate) produce the content in widely accepted digital formats, which are also supported by most LMS platforms, notably according to the Shareable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) standard. The existence of a common format allows the use of external tools to import and deliver e-learning content through a separate LMS platform, and to exchange learning content among disparate systems.

Box 6 – Shareable Content Object Reference Model and other standards

The Shareable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) is a technical standard that facilitates communication between the learning content and the LMS in which it resides. It allows e-learning content to be developed independently from a particular LMS, but still be interpreted (“played”) by and interact with the system. One of the shortcomings of the model is that it is not a strict technical protocol. As a result, some systems and content, while nominally SCORM-compliant, are not fully compatible in reality.

Experience API (xAPI), also known as Tin Can API, is a newer standard that builds on and is intended to replace SCORM. As at 2019, its level of adoption was still relatively low, although it offers greater flexibility and completeness and is supported by many learning platforms.

SCORM is not the only technical standard of relevance for e-learning systems. Learning Tools Interoperability is another technical standard defining interoperability between e-learning systems that could be of interest to the participating organizations, as it allows for the easy integration of external tools and modules with a LMS.⁵¹

273. While the use of the SCORM standard enables content exchange among organizations, it is not an entirely trouble-free process. Because the standard evolved over a long period of time, its different versions are supported by different software tools. In addition, in everyday practice, it is not fully compatible with different tools or exhibits different behaviour. The participating organizations reported some difficulties in getting the right version of files when importing content exported by another organization from a different LMS.

5.3. Platforms: unity in diversity?

274. Most leading platforms share a similar set of basic features. However, they often differ in their advanced features, as well as in the navigational paradigm and the overall user experience. Often, subtle differences in the design of the user interface result in different effects on the learners and learning outcomes.⁵²

275. The diversity of platforms is illustrated by the fact that 28 different platforms were reported as being used by only one United Nations organization and nowhere else in the system. Some of the platforms reported are not traditional LMS; they include content libraries, cloud-based language-learning services, video-conferencing applications and a few tools from the new wave of learning applications, including some that use artificial intelligence technologies.

276. The corporate questionnaire was intended to ascertain which features of the platforms are considered the most important and valuable for the organizations. The top three key features for the selection of specific platforms are: support for interaction among learners; support for face-to-face and blended programmes; and easy administration.

277. Another key feature of effective learning is the level of the learners’ engagement with learning materials, peers and tutors or instructors. As this also depends on the usability and design of the learning platform, organizations should consider the properties of platforms they wish to use in relation to the engagement levels that can be promoted with that platform.

⁵¹ One of the “marketplaces” for third-party extensions is hosted by the website <https://www.eduappcenter.com/>; it is aimed at different LMS platforms that support this standard (Moodle included).

⁵² Learning outcomes are statements that describe the knowledge or skills students should acquire by the end of a particular assignment, class, course or programme and help students understand why that knowledge and those skills will be useful to them.

278. Other important aspects of learning management systems should be considered as criteria in selecting and assessing the most suitable platforms. For example, in respect of administration and talent management, an appropriate learning platform can provide valuable information about staff learning needs, progress and successes.

Main platforms used

279. There is a nascent, apparently unintended, convergence among the principal platforms used by the participating organizations. Of the traditional LMS platforms, the only one used more broadly is the Moodle system, used by eight organizations. However, in some of those cases, it is used as an auxiliary, in addition to a different main LMS or only in an early/exploration phase.

280. The second most reported is Cornerstone onDemand, a cloud-based platform used by five responding organizations. The popularity of this platform is at least in part due to its integration with human resources/performance management systems.

281. An equal number of responses report the use of LinkedIn Learning (formerly Lynda.com), which is not a traditional LMS, but an external content platform that acts as a basic delivery platform as well. Some organizations provide staff with free access to its content, while others have managed to integrate the courses offered on this platform into their in-house LMS. This platform is explored further in the section on the use of ready-made external programmes.

282. Claned is a social learning platform used by for both online and face-to-face courses by UNSSC. One of the main features of online courses on Claned is the social element: the ability of participants to comment on all content, to engage with each other's answers, share knowledge and be assisted by moderators to answer questions and share relevant information. Another feature is that participants can have permanent access to course content. For face-to-face courses, Claned serves as a repository of all relevant information before, during and after a course (including pre-course readings, presentations and reports).

Box 7 – The Moodle family

Moodle is the most widely used open-source (and free) LMS globally and most probably the most widely used such system in general. It is developed and maintained by an international community, and optionally supported by a network of certified partners. A number of Internet service providers also offer Moodle hosting in the cloud for those that do not wish to run and maintain their own server infrastructure. It supports collaborative approaches to online learning through a number of features and benefits from a wide set of plug-ins that extend its basic functionality.

Totara is a commercial derivative of Moodle. While it relies on the open source Moodle software, through a subscriptions model, it offers a package aimed at corporate users, which reduces the technical complexity and improves the security and stability of the LMS. It is a hybrid model, where the value added by the service provider on top of the open-source platform allows users to preserve the freedom of data portability.

Moodle has traditionally been free to download and install on servers, modify and adapt. It remains so for standard academic uses. However, the version of Moodle for corporate use (Moodle Workplace) is available only on a pay-per-use basis through Moodle Partners.

283. The United Nations System Staff College is currently the only United Nations organization legally allowed to implement Moodle Workplace outside the Moodle Partners model by virtue of an agreement with the Moodle Foundation. The College uses this technology to deploy customized e-learning portals for the United Nations system clients.

Open source versus proprietary learning management systems

284. The two most used LMS among the responding organizations – Moodle and Cornerstone onDemand – reflect two different paradigms in today's software/digital world. Moodle and its derivative Totara are software applications that are developed using the open-source approach. This means that the computer code of which they are made is publicly available for anyone to view, audit, use and modify.

285. The open-source software is most often developed by communities through a transparent and inclusive process, even when it is supported by large tech companies. The way that open-source software and processes function is somewhat similar to the way that Wikipedia serves as a public resource, created, maintained and governed by an inclusive community.

286. The open-source software allows significant freedom in how it is used: it can easily be modified and adapted. Most often it is also (although not always) cost-free. While the open-source approach is attractive to many due to the social values associated with it, it is also considered to offer very solid objective benefits, which is why companies like Google, IBM and Microsoft embrace this approach. Many consider well-maintained open-source software to be more secure than proprietary software, due to its exposure to thousands of developers and contributors worldwide.

287. In contrast, proprietary software may be produced by tech companies and specialized developers, through a very structured process. Their computer code is closely guarded as intellectual property that belongs to the companies. The use of proprietary software is guided by legal agreements and the applications cannot be freely modified or adapted by users beyond the configuration process envisaged by the vendor, although in some cases they can be extended through external modules developed by users.

288. This allows for a focused development and rapid evolution of proprietary software in the most successful cases. The users become fully dependent on the vendors of their application for any changes and improvements. However, some vendors do not have the capacity to respond quickly to the changing needs of their users and the evolving markets. This can result in obsolete and old-fashioned applications, which lock their users into using unsatisfactory products, as the effort and cost of changing a LMS can be significant.

289. The LMS platforms based on these two business and deployment approaches all have advantages and disadvantages. In general, a particular approach alone does not guarantee the quality and suitability of a LMS for an organization. The maturity and stability of open source LMS depend on the size and structure of the community that supports them. For proprietary LMS, it is the orientation, maturity and agility of the vending company that determines its overall quality.

290. Although open-source software is free of licensing costs, its adoption and use is not entirely cost-free. Its installation and configuration, maintenance and technical mastery require labour, which translates into costs. The full cost of ownership is not obvious for organizations with limited technical resources and little experience with deploying similar software applications. However, after the initial investment and reaching a critical mass, the costs grow fairly slowly when scaling up use and adding new users.

291. For proprietary software, the costs are somewhat easier to calculate (even though not always as straightforward as it may appear on a first sight). Proprietary LMS that are backed by responsive vendors who provide good technical support, especially when offered as software-as-a-service from the cloud, may be easier to deploy quickly for smaller organizations, as they do not require many internal technical resources.

292. In both cases, the organizations do need to have sufficient learning technology capacity, which should not be confused with purely IT technical skills. Even if the installation, patching and securing of servers is carried out by an internal IT team or outsourced to a vendor, effective use of the platform will depend on the capacity of instructional design teams and learning experts. They will need to understand the properties of the particular platform in order to design e-learning programmes that make good use of the selected platforms.

293. Organizations should not think only in terms of solely proprietary or solely open-source models. The hybrid model, combining the freedom and transparency of the open-source approach with structured support from agile vendors has become a very viable alternative today.

294. The Inspector notes that organizations using cloud-based learning platforms (both as their primary LMS and as complementary platforms) should ensure they have full data ownership over, and easy access to, the data generated by their staff's use of these platforms. Learners' activities on learning platforms generate a rich set of data that can be analysed and used for further improvement of the learning programmes, as well as for impact evaluation purposes.

295. Most corporate cloud-based learning platforms include dashboards and analytic tools for learning administrators – organizations should require and make use of these. For example, WHO utilizes the dashboard function of its Cornerstone LMS to allow business owners, regional managers and team leaders to track and monitor progress in the mandatory courses. In some cases, the full analytic data is not made fully or easily available to the organizations. **The Inspector recommends that the learning managers should require cloud-based vendors to provide access to comprehensive analytics from the data generated by learners from their organizations during the learning activity.**

296. Finally, the openness and the business model of platforms should not be the main criteria for choosing a platform. There are other strategic criteria (for example, integration or scalability) and many functional criteria (such as support for interaction among learners) that may matter equally or more for an organization.

297. The facilitation of interaction and collaboration is another criterion by which organizations may consider their platforms as a good fit for their needs. This is not surprising, considering the widespread use of self-paced programmes in the United Nations system. According to information received by JIU, approximately ten times more people are trained through self-paced online programmes than through instructor-led online programmes.

298. Ultimately, the level of interaction, collaboration and learner support needed in a programme depends on the topic, audience and learning objectives, as discussed elsewhere in the present report. Certain topics and skills can be learned effectively through various self-paced formats, which provide maximum flexibility and scale up well, while other topics will require facilitation and interaction in cohort-based programmes. However, having a platform that supports interaction and collaboration allows organizations to have these features available when they are needed, including for inter-agency collaboration.

299. Several United Nations organizations offer learning to external beneficiaries (for example, as part of capacity-development programmes or in training implementing partners). However, only three of them report using the same learning platform for internal needs and external beneficiaries. In addition, three other organizations (UNWTO, UNICEF and WHO) are currently in the process of creating a platform that will be used both for internal and external learners. As part of that process, WHO provides access to its iLearn LMS for external partners for some mandatory training.

300. While learning as such should not be different for internal and external audiences, there are some objective differences and challenges when using the same platform for both types of end user:

- (a) Internal learning is part of the staff's longer-term engagement with their organization on a learning and development path facilitated by the organization's learning and human resources teams; it is usually funded from the regular budget. The learning trajectory of a staff member should fit with the long-term organizational strategy;
- (b) External audiences are usually engaged for the duration of a project or action. Individually, they are not covered by the organization's internal learning and development strategies and plans and they are not monitored or "coached" in the same way as staff members. Their learning is typically planned by different units and project teams within the organization. The number of participants in external programmes can, in some cases, be much higher than that of staff numbers. Funding comes often from extrabudgetary resources.

301. It follows from the above that certain platform properties may be more important for internal learning – for example, human resources-oriented features and the integration of the learning platform with other human resources and ERP modules. On the other hand, scalability and low cost may be of greater importance for externally-oriented learning aimed a high number of participants.

302. There is a potential for overall gains for the organization, primarily in reducing the complexity and cost of running two different software systems, if both needs can be served by the same LMS or learning platform. Additional benefits from using a single platform may be gained by different organizational units and teams working closer together, sharing technical and pedagogical expertise more usefully and adopting good practices. **The Inspector recommends that learning managers should, where appropriate, reduce the number of different internal learning platforms and use the same LMS for both audiences.**

303. One example of good practice can be found in the UNHCR Global Learning and Development Centre, which serves both staff and external learning needs. The Centre's learning teams support talent development for both internal staff and field-based project teams, who are active collaborators in the development of learning programmes (while maintaining a degree of independence and choice).

304. However, while it may in general seem desirable to have a unified platform for internal and external audiences, that cannot be taken as a universal principle for United Nations organizations. In some cases, organizational structures and contexts (including differences in procurement processes and funding sources) may be better served by having two different systems. However, a comprehensive evaluation can help in making an informed decision.

305. Conclusions:

- (a) While there is some interoperability and exchange of programmes among organizations, there still seems to be untapped potential for sharing platforms;
- (b) It is important to link LMSs with human resources systems to achieve a holistic approach to learning and ease of administration;
- (c) Not many organizations use a single platform for internal and external learning programmes;
- (d) There is a growing trend among some organizations towards the use of ready-made courses. Most of such content is cloud-based, which sometimes requires organizations to use multiple platforms.

306. The Inspector recommends that, in future decisions on the choice of learning management systems, learning managers should favour platforms that allow, inter alia, more interaction and collaboration, within and outside the organization.

Part Three

A system-wide vision: solutions

6. Towards more coherence, coordination and convergence

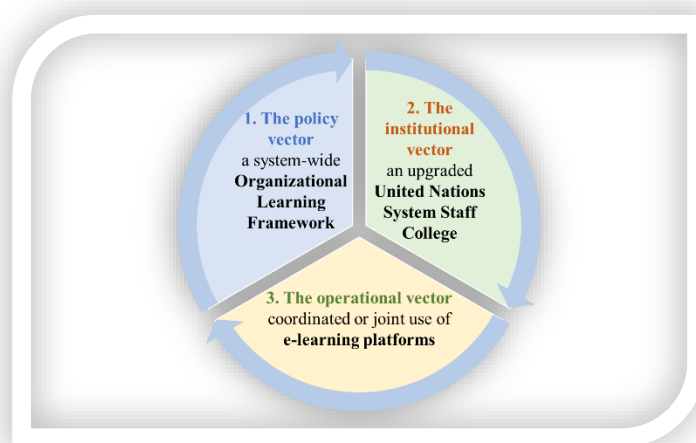
307. The Inspector believes that there are three main vectors that could be decisive in achieving more coherence, coordination and convergence in the United Nations system. While the need for more financial resources should not be ignored, the same three vectors can lead to overall savings at the system-wide level and more efficient spending of Member States' assessed or voluntary contributions. They also offer considerable potential for inter-agency strategic reflection and collective action on learning.

308. The first vector is policy-related: the development of a visionary and strategic organizational learning framework at system-wide level, which should encompass principles and actions built upon the common values and needs of all interested United Nations organizations, agreed and owned by all of them. Such a framework could trigger synergies, prevent duplication and waste of resources and ensure a minimum level of inter-agency solidarity so that no organization, however small and with however few resources for learning, would be left behind.

309. The second vector is institutional: the upgrading and consolidation of the role of the United Nations System Staff College as a system-wide knowledge management and learning institution, starting from its original design and going to an upgrade in the light of the current needs and tools.

310. The third vector is operational in nature: the coordinated, more rigorous, systematic and pragmatic use of e-learning platforms, including joint platforms. E-learning is no longer just one option for reducing spending or a simple alternative to face-to-face or blended courses. E-learning is also more than just a panoply of numerous and diverse learning topics that can be made available offline. E-learning is a feasible and realistic way to ensure constant transformation and adaptation of the entire work force of the United Nations, so that the staff continue to be relevant, competent, competitive and efficient in the discharge of their duties.

Figure 18 – Towards more coherence, coordination and convergence in the United Nations system



311. The following sections will address each of the three vectors separately.

6.1. E-learning opportunities for more efficiency and coordination

6.1.1 Use of open educational resources and content from other United Nations organizations

312. Under circumstances of limited resources, learning can still be stimulated by the use of ready-made e-learning from open sources. UNESCO defines open educational resources as “teaching, learning or research

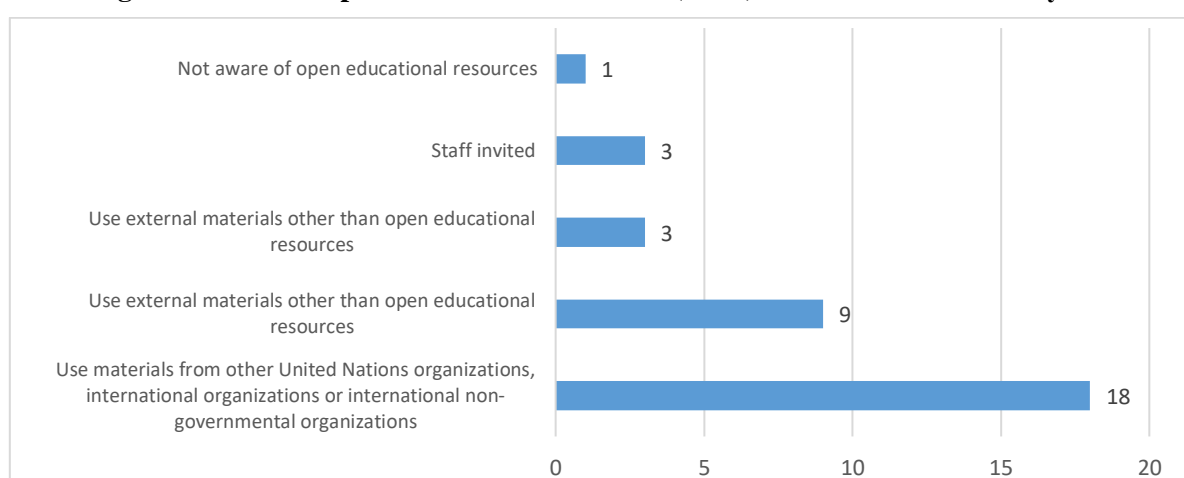
materials that are in the public domain or released with intellectual property licenses that facilitate the free use, adaptation and distribution of resources”.⁵³ While the term originates from the 2002 UNESCO Forum on the Impact of Open Courseware for Higher Education in Developing Countries, the idea of sharing educational resources freely and a movement to that end has earlier roots.⁵⁴

313. The Inspector notes that the quality and reliability of such resources have been subject to criticism in the past. Nevertheless, the global success of the Wikipedia model, as an open, community-curated resource gives hope that with the right curating, broader use of open educational resources is possible.

Use of open educational resources in the United Nations system

314. According to the data collected by the review team (see figure 19 below, where the number of organizations is reflected on the vertical axis), it seems that awareness of open educational resources is relatively low among the United Nations organizations. There are only three organizations that reported using such resources in their proper sense.

Figure 19 – Use of open educational resources (OER) in the United Nations system



315. In many responses, there seems to be some confusion between open educational resources and other forms of publicly available courses and materials that could be used for learning. The responses to this question cite the use of Coursera’s massive open online courses, YouTube videos and commercially available off-the-shelf content.

316. In itself, the fact that organizations are using existing materials, where possible, rather than reinventing them is positive. However, there is a significant difference between the spirit and embodiment of open educational resources, which can be freely used, adapted to one’s needs and distributed and the examples listed in the previous paragraph. Commercial solutions cannot be modified and distribution licenses may impose a number of limitations, or direct costs.

317. While many responses specify or imply a lack of awareness of open educational resources, other responses point to specific reasons why they are not used. A few organizations report that such resources are not suitable for them or for learning needs in the United Nations system.

318. UN-Women states that “UN-Women does not use ready-made e-learning content, as it is not always most relevant. Preference for the use of other partner and stakeholder materials as more relevant and encourages a collaborative and more consistent approach. Where applicable, UN-Women does use ready-made content from other United Nations organizations”. Similarly, WFP states that resources from www.oercommons.org have not been used because the organization already had resources for certain subjects and no relevant resources were identified for other subjects.

⁵³ “Open Educational Resources”, 2019. Available at <https://en.unesco.org/themes/ict-education/oer>.

⁵⁴ In April 2001, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology announced that it would make all the material for all its undergraduate and graduate courses publicly and freely available online. This was seen as a move that could revolutionize education and give a significant boost to the idea of making education more open and accessible. This web repository is still active today, with materials from thousands of the Institute’s courses available at <https://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>.

319. Some organizations (for example, the Economic Commission for Europe, whose learning resources are primarily provided by the United Nations Office at Geneva) state that they do not have the resources to explore alternative sources of learning material. While this may seem counter-intuitive (as open educational resources are free), there is a certain transaction cost, and knowledge is needed to identify and make good use them.

320. UNESCO, a global supporter of open educational resources, points to a potential difficulty with their use: “due to the time investment required to curate appropriate resources and check and monitor quality and relevance”. However, UNESCO would support the idea of a system-wide approach to overcoming this obstacle: “This is, however, an example of where inter-agency knowledge sharing and advice could be useful, so that work is not duplicated across the United Nations system.”

Box 8 – Open universities (an example)

There are many open universities in the world. The Open University in the United Kingdom is a leading online and distance learning establishment. Since 1996, it has pioneered both research and practical use of communications technologies in education. It runs two services as open education:

1. OpenLearn: an online platform with free courses and educational material, available as open educational resources. It focuses on content created by the Open University and its partners. The content available on OpenLearn is free for re-use by anyone under the Creative Commons licenses. It is not only a platform for individual learning, but also a source of learning content for further use.

2. OpenLearn Create: a free online learning platform allowing individuals or organization to publish their own courses. It is a fully functional learning platform, based on the Moodle LMS, supporting collaboration, analytics, badges and many other features expected from a modern system. This platform could be used to experiment, to publish learning programmes and possibly even to serve as a cost-free LMS platform for organizations with limited resources. It also provides some free support for courses and organizations that are strategically aligned with the Open University’s objectives.

Conclusion: the use of open educational resources is mostly unexplored

321. The scarcity of financial resources for learning does not justify lack of interest in valorizing other modalities for the provision of learning solutions. The use of open educational resources remains mostly unexplored by the responding organizations. Their use and curation requires a certain investment in terms of time and resources and could be an obstacle for smaller organizations and those with limited learning resources. A system-wide approach could help make better use of these freely available resources, where they are relevant for the learning needs of the organizations.

322. The Inspector fully shares the view of UNESCO on the potential benefit, in particular for smaller organizations and those with limited learning budgets, of an inter-agency approach to the identification of open sources for the entire United Nations system.

Recommendation 5

The Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization should, in coordination with the leaderships of all interested organizations in the United Nations system, in particular the United Nations System Staff College, establish and maintain a comprehensive catalogue of open learning resources that are relevant for individual organizations and for cross-cutting learning needs, in particular those related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

323. A catalogue of open learning resources would allow both easy access to the resources available and a selective approach from a comparative perspective.

6.1.2. Publishing and sharing e-learning programmes externally

324. Knowledge no longer stops at borders. The United Nations system is a provider of global public goods. Consequently, learning should not stop at the door of silos.

325. Traditionally, e-learning platforms run by organizations have been closed systems, conceived and used within an organization for use by its employees. Even when an organization also delivers e-learning programmes to external partners and beneficiaries, there is generally no strong connection between internal and external learning and different platforms are used for the two audiences.

326. Similarly, most learning programmes designed by organizations for staff training have been designed with the internal audience (within one organization) in mind. One exception to this rule is the courses designed by the United Nations System Staff College and offered to other organizations in the system. Some mandatory courses offered by the United Nations Secretariat are increasingly being designed for use by other United Nations organizations. There are only a few other examples of programmes co-designed and used by multiple agencies.

327. Presently, most programmes published for external use are aimed at Member States and other capacity-building beneficiaries. United Nations Secretariat entities also publish programmes on the Inspira system, which in some cases are also used by other organizations in the system. The UNICEF Agora system hosts courses that are open to the staff of other United Nations organizations and to the general public.

328. However, 11 responding organizations report not publishing their programmes in any form for use by other organizations in the United Nations system, and/or that they do not use the platforms of other organizations. Where they do, such actions are only sporadic.

329. In light of the holistic approach stemming from the 2030 Agenda, organizations in the United Nations system should, as a matter of principle, recognize that the openness that comes with making their learning programmes available to other United Nations organizations can foster coherence and convergence.

330. Moreover, in practical terms, doing so could promote savings and cost efficiency. However, the practice is not as widespread as it could be to benefit other organizations in the system, partners and the general public. In some cases, the current sharing practices reported refer to the publishing of raw training materials, which is laudable, but more akin to sharing open educational resources than making training directly available to learners outside an organization.

331. Even when online learning programmes are available to others, this does not mean that they are actually used. Only five responses indicate the use of programmes from the UNICEF Agora platform and a number of others report the use of the United Nations Secretariat's mandatory programmes.

Benefits and challenges

332. Programmes of interest to two or more organizations that are developed as shared programmes could avoid duplication, and thus result in cost savings. The development of content that meets the specific needs of multiple organizations would also bring more coherence. Another benefit is the interaction among staff from different organizations in learning programmes.

333. E-learning programmes shared by two or more organizations could be hosted on and delivered from a single shared platform or, alternatively, replicated and imported into the learning platforms of each participating organization. The single shared platform has the advantage of offering a centralized location for any course updates and maintenance, a single helpdesk, a single technical team supporting the platform and the programmes, and a single facilitation and tutoring team in case of facilitated, cohort-based programmes.

334. However, it means that staff of other participating organizations need to attend courses on an external platform, which does not contain their full human resources profiles and learning history; that would make it more difficult to enrol learners and to include achievements and completion information in the learning records or human resources database of all "external" learners. Such complications reduce the motivation of learners.

335. The solutions to this challenge are the same as those already mentioned for related scenarios: the introduction of compatible and portable e-learning certificates and/or full integration of relevant external courses into the learning platforms of the participating organizations (making them appear in the list of courses of each organization and automatically updating the learning records with learners' progress).

336. The alternative solution, of replicating course content and importing it into the learning platforms of the participating organizations, is less desirable. That would require any updates to the course content to be

repeated on every learning platform where the course has been imported. For facilitated courses, each organization hosting and offering an imported copy of the course would have to train and make available a facilitation team of their own, which would result in some redundancy and additional costs.

6.1.3. Use of standardized external programmes

337. Outside the United Nations system, there is a trend towards learning solutions becoming more open across the business sector and academia. Examples include courses launched and supported by leading international universities (such Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University and the Open University) and related partnerships (including with the private sector). There has been a big push in this direction as a result of the wave of massive open online courses.⁵⁵

338. The development of cloud-based e-learning platforms offering a variety of ready-made programmes and formats has impacted the United Nations organizations, too. The most popular of them among responding organizations is LinkedIn Learning, formerly Lynda.com (19 cases of reported use), followed by Coursera (9 cases) and EdX (5 cases).

339. To avoid possible confusion with LMS-like learning platforms used by organizations to host their own learning content and activities, it should be noted that the content platforms considered in the rest of this section are focused on delivering standardized ready-made programmes to all their customers, rather than serving the needs of a particular organization or hosting organization's learning.

MOOC - inspired platforms

340. The initial offering of learning programmes on MOOC-inspired platforms focused on relatively simple courses, which have since then evolved in their sophistication enabling more interaction among participants and a bigger variety of learning activities (including microlearning). This alone does not guarantee that all the courses available today on these platforms are designed according to sound instructional practices, but the current offer includes a broad range of options in terms of quality.

341. Many MOOCs available on these platforms are accessible for free. A fee may be charged if certification is required. Other courses are only available for a fee, with costs typically being quite low. Some of the platforms offer a subscription-based model – for example FutureLearn offers unlimited access to short online courses for \$239 per year, with a great variety of topics, ranging from “Management and Leadership: Leading a Team” to “Antimicrobial Stewardship”. The courses are typically provided by different universities, using the common platform for delivery, and can be taken individually or as a part of a degree.

342. For example, UNICEF has developed several MOOCs with academic partners, publishing them on leading global platforms (Coursera, EdX and FutureLearning) for use by both internal and external audiences. The course design includes practical exercises and discussion among participants, resulting in higher engagement than average internal courses.

343. The ILO International Training Centre also considers MOOCs to be a good practice in the development context, particularly because of the ease with which they can be scaled up. Fully aware of the challenges that this format presents, the Centre has published a very useful guide to their use⁵⁶ and developed a related toolkit.

LinkedIn Learning and other corporate learning options

344. The LinkedIn Learning digital learning platform is already in use by a number of United Nations organizations. It is a good example of the first wave of such commercial offerings. The courses are mostly short and based on video lectures and their transcriptions. In some cases, there is a possibility for a simple exchange with the course team in a sidebar and some supplementary exercise material for download may be offered. Often the courses included quizzes on each chapter and an exam at the end. Double certification (by LinkedIn and other professional associations) is available for some courses.

345. The catalogue of courses is extensive and is divided into ‘Business’, ‘Creative’ and ‘Technology’. Some short courses are grouped together into “learning paths” that offer a simple way of covering a broader theme

⁵⁵ The *New York Times* declared 2012 the ‘Year of the MOOC’.

⁵⁶ The MOOCs4Dev @ITCILO Report.

than is the case with individual courses, on topics such as artificial intelligence. This kind of learning environment seems most suitable for self-organized and motivated learners who wish to explore new topics.

346. Several learning portals/platforms with a corporate orientation, while not widely used in the system, were reported by one or two organizations each. This group includes learning offers such as those of Cegos, Harvard Business Publishing and Harvard ManageMentor, Skillsoft and Mindtools. While these solutions differ among themselves in some aspects (for example, the provision and extent of feedback for learners or the level of interactivity), they are mostly focused on providing self-paced microlearning⁵⁷ around management and leadership skills training.

347. Some of them offer the possibility of integration with an in-house LMS or downloadable content, while others can only be used through the vendor's online platform. They also offer "learning paths" or channels that group smaller learning units around bigger goals, such as becoming a manager.

348. The United Nations organizations also report use of YouTube videos and TED talks. While these and similar platforms might, in some cases, host entire programmes, they more frequently offer content pieces or building blocks for larger programmes conceived or designed by organizations.

Box 9 – Artificial intelligence and learning

The raise of artificial intelligence technologies in recent years will certainly have an impact on mainstream e-learning. While some of the e-learning platforms have started to experiment with artificial intelligence tools, often for implementing some form of adaptable learning, solid evidence of major achievements is yet to be seen.

The most direct implementation of artificial intelligence is visible in the Orai application, reported by UNDP. Orai is a mobile device application that helps learners improve their speech and communication skills. Intended for general team members, not professional speakers, it is meant to improve the confidence of staff to speak in work situations. To achieve this goal, artificial intelligence technology is employed to become an electronic "coach", capable of providing feedback on a speech recorded by application users, along dimensions such as pace, expression, energy and confidence.

Benefits and challenges of using external platforms

349. The Inspector believes that the use of standardized learning programmes offers a number of potential benefits:

- (a) The available e-learning programmes are ready-to-use instantly;
- (b) The many platforms available offer learning programmes addressing a significant variety of topics, thus reducing the need for in-house development of programmes;
- (c) The unit cost (per learner and per course) is generally low (compared to the cost of developing customized courses in-house). For example, a fee of \$20 can be easily paid by motivated staff members themselves, and many MOOC platforms can be taken for free;
- (d) In principle, a significant part of the available learning content has gone through a quality assurance process and can be trusted to provide reliable learning and information. Caution is still required, together with a prior evaluation of courses to be directly recommended to staff, as there are significant variations in the quality and efficiency of the programmes offered.

350. Subscription-based platforms offer integration with in-house LMS, allowing for easy tracking of staff interests and progress on the external platform when a corporate license is purchased for the whole organization. For example, Claned provides the United Nations System Staff College with analytic reports on the content visited by learners, time spent on the platform, clusters of topics of interests, etc.

351. At the same time, there are some potential challenges to be taken into account:

⁵⁷ Microlearning offers highly focused, self-contained and bite-sized learning. See the ILO International Training Centre online introduction to the concept (<https://readymag.com/ITCILO/846236/>).

- (a) On video-driven platforms, learning is mostly passive, taking the form of listening to or watching pre-recorded videos. The lower engagement that may result can translate into poorer motivation and learning outcomes;
- (b) The instructional design and content quality of courses vary among platforms, as well as among different offerings on the same platform. Organizations should evaluate and curate courses of strategic importance for their staff. This is needed in particular when more than one external platforms are used;
- (c) Subscription-based platforms may amount to more costs for large organizations. Therefore, the number of annual subscriptions should be rigorously estimated for each year, allowing a balance between needs and resources, as well as between prior planning and flexibility;
- (d) Organizations should verify the availability of courses in other languages than English.

352. **The Inspector believes that the use of external platforms, if based on judicious curating and realistic learning objectives, is a reasonable solution for learning that can assist organizations to address challenges resulting from both a scarcity of resources and the need for diversity of learning topics. This modality of learning can supplement the in-house learning that organizations design and deliver with standardized learning programmes on many topics and save time and money for topics where appropriate ready-made content is found. Organizations will define the nature and the level of learning credentials that are relevant and appropriate for their objectives.**

353. The implementation of the following recommendations will allow an efficient use of the potential brought by the use of digital technologies for learning.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, if they have not already done so, should establish criteria for the more systematic use of external platforms, based on judicious curating of their courses and realistic learning objectives.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should, through inter-agency agreements, recognize relevant learning programmes followed on external platforms, for which appropriate credentials are presented, and reflect that recognition in the learning management systems.

354. Staff members may be encouraged and guided to access external programmes individually, as part of their personal development, complementary to the internal offer. Alternatively, organizations can apply a more structured approach, making selected external programmes equal with other offerings in their learning catalogues, especially when they find that external programmes cater for a significant part of their learning needs.

355. **The Inspector encourages the participating organizations, in particular, the United Nations System Staff College, the ILO International Training College and the UNHCR Global Learning and Development Centre, to elaborate, use and disseminate guides and toolkits on the use of external e-learning platforms and innovative learning technologies, which may include a common space for sharing long-term agreements related to learning.**

6.1.4. A common certification system

356. From the perspective of system-wide coherence based on common values and similar needs, the review explored the issue of the recognition of skills acquired in and learning certificates issued by other United Nations organizations.

357. More than 60 per cent of the responses from the participating organizations state that they recognize skills acquired in and certificates issued by other United Nations organizations. Three organizations recognize only the mandatory training certificates obtained within the system. Five responses indicate conditional recognition of certificates issued by other United Nations organizations.

358. The Inspector believes that this is an encouraging response which still leaves some space for improvement. The full recognition of skills and certificates obtained within the United Nations system could improve employee mobility and reduce repeated and duplicate training, which has advantages for both the employees and the agencies. Apart from the cost savings arising from the duplicate training avoided, further benefit would be the time gained for the productive deployment of staff – especially for those starting their new positions. A common certification approach will also contribute to more coherence and more coordination in the United Nations system.

359. A first practical requirement in promoting wider acceptance of learning credentials (as well as simplifying and reducing the work currently needed for the recognition of certificates) would be a framework or a practical system for establishing equivalency of programmes and certificates among United Nations organizations – and a concerted effort to do so. That effort would also support a similar effort to identify, unify and share equivalent programmes. As ESCAP stated:

...there is currently no way for verifying the content, methodology and objectives of the learning programmes organized by other United Nations entities to assess their equivalency to our programmes. It would be useful to have such a system developed, which would also promote inter-organizational mobility and career development.

360. A second, technical component to this initiative would be the adoption of standard portable and verifiable digital certificates for learning achievements in the United Nations system. While such an option might be considered independently from the effort to establish equivalency, it would most likely achieve its full potential if considered and developed together with it.

361. While it seems logical that a common framework or a system for determining equivalency would contribute to the efficiency of the system (fewer duplicated courses and better quality assurance of their contents), its implementation requires the support of all organizations and a vision beyond the narrow interest of individual organizations. Such a vision would need to encompass inter-agency solidarity, in view of the disparity of resources at the United Nations system-wide level.

362. Developing such a system would require, first and foremost, a focused effort to avoid duplication of similar or equivalent learning programmes. If a system-wide initiative to take stock of the mandatory and some optional courses were to be undertaken, less effort would be needed to develop equivalency criteria and stimulate systemic support.

363. The existing technologies can facilitate United Nations system-wide certification and portability opportunities, such as digital certificates. Digital certificates could be introduced together with a common framework or independently. In the absence of a common framework, organizations could experiment with a bottom-up, technically driven effort, which may prompt an incremental search for common criteria and eventually bring more coherence and convergence to the system.

364. Some United Nations staff who use e-learning platforms are already earning standard digital certificates from external providers. Internal United Nations LMS are, at present, not systematically capable of accepting these credentials. A possible initiative to introduce a similar system internally, within the United Nations system, would have the additional benefit of facilitating the processing of external digital certificates based on open standards.

Box 10 – Digital certificates – Open Badges and more

Open standards and frameworks for digital certificates have been in existence for some years now. The most popular and widely known system in the public domain is the Open Badges standard, initiated in 2011. Over the years, hundreds of organizations have adopted this standard for issuing various certificates.

Open Badges are verifiable and portable digital certificates, containing embedded metadata about skills and achievements. The standard is flexible, enabling its wide use in certification and authorization, and supporting credentials ranging from microcertificates to degrees. Today, many popular learning platforms and corporate entities, from top massive open online course platforms to companies such as IBM, use digital badges or certificates based on the Open Badges standard.

Most recently, we have seen several projects experimenting with a combination of digital certificates and blockchain technology in order to increase the robustness of digital certificates and trust, as blockchain technology is considered tamper-proof. For example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab initiated one such project (Open Badge compatible) that resulted in a public verification platform called Blockcerts.

365. The Inspector recommends that the United Nations Learning Managers network should experiment with a common portable digital certification system by making efficient use of open standards and resources or in partnership with learning service providers.

6.2. A common United Nations Organizational Learning Framework

366. One of the most important developments in the history of learning in the United Nations from a system-wise perspective is the Organizational Learning Framework. It is a document developed by the learning managers of the United Nations system organizations and presented to CEB in 2003.⁵⁸

367. The framework is remarkable as a first attempt to define a set of learning standards for the entire system by describing six principles to define best practice in learning in the United Nations system.⁵⁹

- (a) Learning is strategic: learning enhances the ability of the Organization to meet its strategic goals and objectives and is seen as an essential investment in staff;
- (b) Learning is part of the culture: learning is anchored in the management culture and its support system;
- (c) Learning is a shared responsibility: learning is the shared responsibility of the learners, supervisors and the organization;
- (d) Learning is accessible: all staff members have the right to access appropriate learning and career development opportunities;
- (e) Learning is more than training: learning is both a process and an outcome; it includes formal and informal approaches; it can be individual, team- or project-based; it is not limited to classroom-based training;
- (f) Learning is effective: learning needs are met in an effective way and learning has a positive impact on the quality of work.

368. In the preparation for this review, the Inspector was not able to find any evidence of action taken with respect to the document. The review therefore includes this issue in order to assess any possible outcomes of the initiative and the current level of need and readiness for such a common learning framework.

369. The responses received reveal that a majority of the responding organizations think that a common United Nations Learning Framework is or could be useful. Some organizations consider the 2003 framework still valid today and have applied its principles. Only four organizations do not think that such a common framework is feasible or useful.

⁵⁸ CEB, Conclusions of the meeting of the human resources network, 8 September 2003, doc. CEB/2003/HLCM/20, 8 September 2003.

⁵⁹ United Nations System Staff College, Organizational Learning Framework: Principles and Indicators, CEB/2003/HLCM/17, annex.

370. In the view of the Inspector, an Organizational Learning Framework with system-wide ownership and authority is a golden opportunity to establish a place where most of the issues confronting the learning stakeholders (learners and managers) can find optimum solutions and the best responses to the imperatives of the 2030 Agenda. The Framework is particularly symbolic because:

- (a) It represented a bottom-up initiative by the learning managers themselves;
- (b) It encompassed a modern vision of learning;
- (c) It built a system-wide consensus on its content;
- (d) Notwithstanding the fact the Organizational Learning Framework did not acquire official status, its principles have influenced the learning policies of some organizations.

371. Indeed, the Inspector noted with satisfaction that some of the organizations that favour a system-wide Organizational Learning Framework have already incorporated the 2003 Framework into their own policies and follow the six principles, while others are calling for a revision and update to a new framework.

372. While not attempting in any way to prejudice the contents of a future United Nations System Organizational Learning Framework, the Inspector considers it useful to list some of the suggestions offered by several participating organizations about the scope of a possible updated framework:

- (a) Common standards for needs assessment and evaluation of learning programmes;
- (b) Coordination and possibly inter-agency collaboration in specific learning areas. Common or mutually recognized initiatives could be offered in cross-cutting areas, while specific agencies could take the lead in offering specialized learning solutions in specific thematic fields;
- (c) A practical approach that would include a number of administrative and governance standards (such as minimum budgets or minimum entitlements);
- (d) Minimum guidance for the governance of learning, e.g. learning advisory boards, the role of senior management, etc.);
- (e) The creation of commonly recognized United Nations Learning Badges;
- (f) The reflection of a new approach which should shift the focus from traditional skills-based training to a broader organization-based learning eco-system;
- (g) A common benchmark document with minimum quality criteria across the United Nations in order to ensure quality assurance;
- (h) Guidelines for the design and development of learning solutions;
- (i) Creation of a United Nations open platforms (MOOC-type).

373. The Inspector welcomes in particular the shift from principles to action-oriented proposals, including minimum common standards on needs assessment and evaluation of learning programmes, that allow organizations to go beyond the minimum and also transcend individual specificities.

374. At the same time, the Inspector notes some caveats, as referred to by a few organizations in the light of the organizational budgets, capacities and mandates.

- resources for learning are not allocated in a consistent manner;
- for small agencies it would be a challenge to implement a common learning framework;
- an overly prescriptive or bureaucratic framework may limit the agility and the innovation efforts of participating organizations.

375. The Inspector believes that collective ownership of the Organizational Learning Framework should be promoted through the participation of learning managers from all organizations, whether large or small. The Framework should be conceived in an action-oriented and comprehensive manner, to include both minimum standards and guidelines. Balance and flexibility are important to avoid any excessive approach, as rightly described by UNOPS:

... if the framework were very specific, it would likely be difficult to integrate within diverse contexts and realities. On the other hand, if the framework is very generic, it would risk being too abstract and becoming obsolete in a short time, as we have seen happen with previous initiatives.

376. There are differences among organizations as to the scope of a new or updated common learning framework. There are more proposals than those listed above. However, the collective conceptual efforts of actual practitioners in the participating organizations can nevertheless make such a framework feasible and realistic.

N.B.: without prejudice to any future reflection or action on the matter, the system-wide strategic vision that could be translated into an Organization Learning Framework should not be the work of an external consultant. The intellectual resources for such an exercise are available within the system. During his interviews and meetings, the Inspector recognized the availability of very resourceful managers and officials with a genuine passion and vocation for learning. They only need institutional support and incentives to engage in the elaboration of such a policy document.

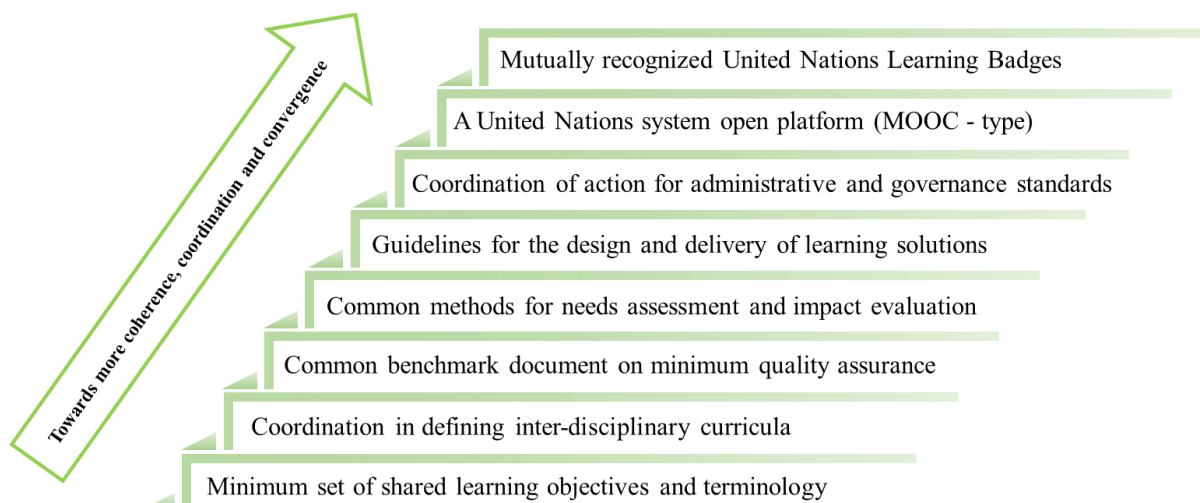
377. The Inspector recommends that all learning managers should refer to international standard ISO 29993, entitled “Learning services outside formal education – Service requirements”. As reported by ILO-ITC, ISO 29993 can be a valuable tool for defining quality assurance standards.

Conclusion

378. The Inspector notes with satisfaction that, despite differences and nuances, there seems to be strong support among learning managers for a common organizational learning framework. The existence of a diversity of opinions on what exactly such a framework should encompass is normal, and by no means implies that it is not possible. A common framework should not only offer a path towards more coherence, coordination and convergence, but also form an expression of inter-agency solidarity. It can serve the needs of all United Nations system organizations, *leaving no one behind*, irrespective of their size or the resources they have. It should be realistic and flexible enough and count on internal resources.

379. Based on the suggestions made by responding organizations, the Inspector proposes, as a working hypothesis to prompt further discussion and analyses, an incremental approach, which would encompass both a strategic vision and concrete and practical steps. Such steps may include: (a) a minimum set of shared learning objectives and terminology; (b) coordination in defining inter-disciplinary curricula or individually conceived programmes that interest organizations other than the author; (c) a common benchmark document on minimum quality assurance; (d) common methods and tools for needs assessment and impact evaluation; (e) guidelines for the design and delivery of learning solutions; (f) coordination of joint action on administrative and governance standards; (g) an open platform for the United Nations system (of the massive open online course type); and (h) mutually recognized and portable United Nations Learning Badges (see figure 20).

Figure 20 - Gradual steps towards more coherence, coordination and convergence



380. The implementation of the following recommendation will lead to more coherence, coordination and convergence in the identification and efficient implementation of learning solutions at system-wide level.

Recommendation 8

The governing bodies of United Nations system organizations should, by the end of 2023, approve a common United Nations Organizational Learning Framework, agreed through relevant inter-agency mechanisms, which should contain a set of principles and a plan of action for gradual implementation.

6.3. Upgrading the United Nations System Staff College

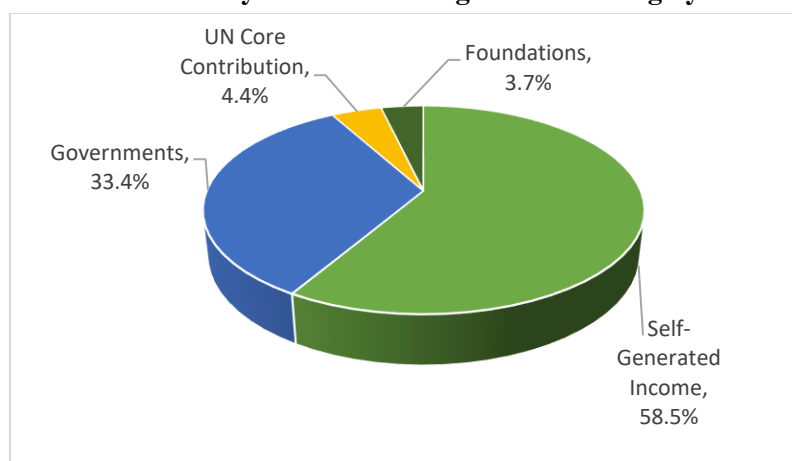
381. The United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) was created by the General Assembly as an institution for system-wide knowledge management, training and continuous learning for the staff of the United Nations system, in particular in the areas of economic and social development, peace and security and internal management. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 55/278, the original mandate and role were broadened, adding the responsibility of UNSSC to become an innovative instrument to enhance cooperation and coherence throughout the United Nations system, including in system-wide coordination. The reporting line was changed pursuant to General Assembly resolution 58/224 to the effect that the biennial reports on the activities of the UNSSC were submitted to the Economic and Social Council rather than to the General Assembly. The College's statute was amended by resolution 2009/10 of the Economic and Social Council.

382. The first remark that comes out of the responses of the participating organizations to the corporate questionnaire is that most of the organizations are satisfied with: (a) the thematic areas covered by the UNSSC; (b) the quality of the courses provided; and (c) its inter-agency vocation. With respect to the thematic areas, those most quoted were the United Nations Leaders Programme, Leadership, Women and the United Nations, the United Nations System Executive Management Programme and the e-Management Certificate programme. Activities related to country teams and change management are also appreciated.

383. The strengths of UNSSC identified by the respondents include most notably: the cultivation of a unifying United Nations identity, the integration of guidance on leadership and management practices and its readiness to customize programmes for agencies. Its openness to collaboration and the co-design of content are also appreciated. The organization of the Learning Managers Forum is reported as one of the College's most useful undertakings.

384. It would seem that all those features describe the ideal profile of a central provider of learning services for the United Nations system. However, almost half of the 28 participating organizations reported not having used the UNSSC learning programmes. They found the cost of the courses prohibitive, a weakness acknowledged by a majority of beneficiaries. Moreover, even those organizations that send participants to such courses complain that the costs are too high compared given the scarcity of their resources allotted to learning, or compared to similar offers of learning services by external providers.

Figure 21 – United Nations System Staff College: total funding by source



385. The Inspector takes note of that general remark about the cost of activities offered by the UNSSC, but recognizes that this weakness is inbuilt in the College’s funding pattern. It is an extra budgetary organization and operates on a cost-recovery basis. The core contributions of all organizations that are potential beneficiaries of the learning services offered amounted to only 4.4 per cent in 2018, in contrast to the self-generated income represented 58.5 per cent of the College’s budget (see figure 21 above).

386. The Inspector also notes the negative impact that unpredictable funding can have on achieving an adequate balance in the use of UNSSC organizational and human resources. The effort to raise funds and generate income for institutional sustainability should not be affected by the effort to provide learning services of a high level of diversity, quality and relevance. The support of the host countries in both campuses, in Turin and Bonn, does not justify the absence of more proactive support from other Member States and governing bodies, nor does it reduce the collective responsibility for the means available to the College. The credibility and efficiency of a central provider of system-wide learning services are the responsibility of all Member States.

387. The table below indicates that, of those organizations accounting for the 4.4 per cent of core contributions, 13 provide amounts of less than \$10,000, while a single face-to-face course may cost \$5,000. Under such circumstances, the expectations that the College’s programmes should “deliver United Nations-specific programmes, tailored to the specific context of the United Nations system”, with “pricing based on the size and budget available within the [beneficiary organization]” does not sound reasonable. More realistic is another opinion of a participating organization, which considers the fact that “the mandate of UNSSC is bigger than its current (operational) capacity”⁶⁰ as a weakness.

Table 1: UNSSC core contributions from United Nations organizations in 2018 (in US dollars)

Organization	Contributions
United Nations Secretariat	150,424
UNICEF	48,140
WHO	47,572
FAO	36,934
UNDP	36,630
UNHCR	35,687
ILO	25,130
UNESCO	24,998
IAEA	20,789
WFP	13,964
ICAO	8,458
ITU	8,133
UNFPA	7,849
WIPO	7,575
UNIDO	7,403
UNOPS	7,068
UNAIDS	5,000
IFAD	3,549
IMO	3,093
UN-WOMEN	3,000
WMO	2,758
UNRWA	2,130
UPU	1,714

388. Even against this background, the expectations of the organizations in the United Nations system are no less. The participating organizations expressed the need for more new learning programmes that cannot be provided by other suppliers, particularly topics applicable to the whole system or relevant to the 2030 Agenda. Such programmes would relieve them of developing their own individual effort. They need more

⁶⁰ Responses to the JIU corporate questionnaire.

advisory services, increased knowledge and innovation in terms of learning and techniques, methodologies, pedagogical approaches, etc.

389. The Inspector shares the view of those who see the need for an upgrade of the status of UNSSC so as to enhance its capacity to supply general learning services. If that were to be done, it could gradually develop its profile as a United Nations learning resources centre by providing:

- (a) Guides, toolkits and inventories of good practices for: instructional design, pedagogical approaches and learning methodologies, e-learning evaluation tools and methods, norms of certification, technical standards and interoperability;
- (b) Platforms analysis: comparing and testing online learning platforms, documenting their strengths and weaknesses and making recommendations;
- (c) Learning content curation: analysing, filtering and curating learning content, including external training for learning professionals, and making relevant recommendations for the United Nations organizations.

390. The Inspector admits that such an upgrade involves the allocation of more resources and support, in a more predictable way. However, if such learning services were made available to all organizations in the United Nations system, the investment would bring fruit, in view of the economies of scale, increased efficiency and sustainable impact.

391. Implementation of the following recommendation will strengthen the role of the United Nations System Staff College as originally envisioned, increase efficiency in the use of learning resources relevant at the United Nations system level and enhance the support given to smaller organizations that have insufficient funds for staff learning.

Recommendation 9

The Economic and Social Council should examine the possibility of revising the current mandate of the United Nations System Staff College, by the end of 2022, from both an operational and a financial perspective, in order to strengthen the College's role as a central learning hub of the United Nations system.

392. The study should be based on the contributions of all learning managers in the system and on the specific expertise of the College and of other learning centres, such as the ILO International Training Centre and the UNHCR Global Learning and Development Centre.

Annex

Overview of action to be taken by the participating organizations on the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit

Report	Intended impact																Specialized agencies and IAEA												
		CEB	United Nations	UNAIDS	UNCTAD	ITC	UNDP	UNEP	UNFPA	UN-Habitat	UNHCR	UNICEF	UNOPS	UNRWA	UN-Women	WFP	FAO	IAEA	ICAO	ILO	IMO	ITU	UNESCO	UNIDO	UNWTO	UPU	WHO	WIPO	WMO
For action		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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Recommendation 1	h		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E			E		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E		E	E	E
Recommendation 2	f,h		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E		E
Recommendation 3	d,f		E		E		E	E	E	E	E			E	E	E	E		E	E	E	E	E	E		E	E	E	E
Recommendation 4	d		E	E	E	E		E	E	E	E	E	E	E		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E		E
Recommendation 5	c																					E							
Recommendation 6	h		E	E	E	E	E	E		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
Recommendation 7	h		E		E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
Recommendation 8	c,d		L	L	L		L	L	L	L	L	L		L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
Recommendation 9	h,c		L																										

Legend:

L: Recommendation for decision by legislative organ

E: Recommendation for action by executive head

: Recommendation does not require action by this organization

Intended impact: a: enhanced transparency and accountability; b: dissemination of good/best practices; c: enhanced coordination and cooperation; d: strengthened coherence and harmonization; e: enhanced control and compliance; f: enhanced effectiveness; g: significant financial savings; h: enhanced efficiency; i: other.