JIU
JOINT INSPECTION UNIT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM
EXTERNAL INDEPENDENT SYSTEM-WIDE OVERSIGHT

REVIEW OF MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION IN THE UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (UNESCO)

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Background

In 2025, the Joint Inspection Unit conducted an independent review of the management and administration of UNESCO. This third review builds on the findings of the 2011 JIU assessment, taking stock of progress made through major institutional reforms undertaken over more than a decade.

The decade following the 2011 JIU review demonstrated that while leadership vision and reform ambition are necessary, they are not sufficient on their own. Without deep structural recalibration, sustained investment in institutional capacity and a coherent financing model, UNESCO remains vulnerable to external shocks and internal inefficiencies. Moving forward will require not only technical solutions but also political commitment, cultural transformation and a renewed compact between Headquarters, field offices and Member States, anchored in shared purpose and strategic alignment.The review took place during a period of substantial organizational change marked by the continued roll-out of the strategic transformation framework launched in 2018, preparations for the 43rd session of the General Conference and the anticipated appointment of a new Director-General.

Against this institutional backdrop, the review examined the Organization's core management functions, including governance and leadership, strategic planning, financial and human resources management, ICT systems, integrity functions, oversight, risk management and inter-agency coordination.

The report contains 13 formal recommendations — seven addressed to the Executive Board and six to the Director-General — along with 39 informal recommendations intended to reinforce UNESCO's management framework and related practices.

Objectives and Purpose

The review aimed to provide an independent assessment of UNESCO's organizational arrangements, regulatory frameworks and management processes with a view to enhancing operational efficiency and institutional effectiveness.

Particular attention was paid to the impact of reforms introduced since 2017 and to long-standing structural challenges affecting governance, coordination between Headquarters and field offices, internal justice, risk management and oversight. The 2011 review served as a baseline to assess the trajectory of change and the extent to which reforms have addressed institutional weaknesses.

What the JIU found

The review acknowledges that UNESCO has undertaken comprehensive reforms in recent years. Executive management structures have been formalized, oversight architecture has been strengthened, and internal justice mechanisms have undergone notable reform. However, progress remains uneven and structural vulnerabilities persist.

Governance and leadership

Despite reforms undertaken since 2017, governance effectiveness continues to be constrained by the absence of a centralized decision-tracking system, overlapping mandates and unclear divisions of responsibility among governing bodies.

The working methods of the Executive Board retain legacy features that limit efficiency, while periodic tensions between executive leadership and the Executive Board have contributed to an erosion of trust. The Secretariat of the Governing Bodies remains critically understaffed and subject to dual reporting lines, raising concerns about neutrality and sustainability.

The executive management architecture, including the Senior Management Team and internal committees, has contributed to a more structured decision-making environment. Nonetheless, siloed operations, uneven coordination between Headquarters, field offices and institutes, and bureaucratic inefficiencies continue to slow decision-making and hinder cross-sectoral implementation. Some management committees lack sufficient authority and functionality to ensure that reform decisions are fully implemented.

The review also identified integrity and reputational risks arising from the absence of a transparent, organization-wide regulatory framework governing internal candidates for the position of Director-General, as well as the lack of clear provisions to ensure geographic diversity at senior levels. The structure of the Cabinet has become increasingly complex, with overlapping advisory roles and appointments not contractually linked to the Director-General's tenure, complicating leadership transitions.

Organizational structure and field presence

UNESCO has strengthened its institutional capacity through the consolidation of administrative services under the Sector for Administration and Management and through reforms to its decentralized field architecture, demonstrating a clear commitment to modernization and closer engagement with Member States. However, the consolidation of administrative functions has not yet translated into strategic integration. Sub-units within the Sector for Administration and Management continue to operate in silos, with limited involvement in early programme design, weak digital integration, and the absence of sector-wide service standards and performance indicators. As a result, the functions of the Sector for Administration and Management remain largely reactive to implementation challenges, rather than proactively enabling accountability, efficiency and programme delivery, thus limiting its strategic value to the Organization.

The review further found that coordination gaps between Headquarters, category 1 institutes and field offices remain a challenge, leading to duplication of effort, mission drift and fragmented impact. While the 2022–2024 field reform clarified reporting lines through a two-tier structure,

its implementation remains uneven. Ongoing deficiencies in staffing, internal controls, risk management, data availability and performance monitoring continue to undermine the reform's effectiveness and limit its ability to achieve cohesive organizational impact.

Accountability, risk and oversight

UNESCO has advanced accountability through the updated accountability framework, providing a stronger foundation for performance monitoring and transparency. Progress in risk governance and the strengthening of the Ethics Office and the Appeals Board reflect commitment to integrity. However, challenges remain: the enterprise risk management framework is underdeveloped, internal controls are inconsistently applied, particularly in field operations, and both the Ethics Office and the Appeals Board face structural limitations that constrain effectiveness. Risk management remains reactive, the corporate risk register is outdated, and ownership of enterprise risk management processes is fragmented across committees with unclear authority. UNESCO has reinforced its oversight architecture, including evaluation, audit and investigative functions. Evaluation practices have advanced under the 2022–2029 policy, but findings are not yet systematically integrated into planning and results-based management. Audit coverage has expanded, but capacity remains insufficient.

Internal justice

Reforms have been introduced to professionalize internal justice. Nevertheless, concerns about perceived inconsistencies in disciplinary sanctions and limited communication on decision rationale further undermines confidence in fairness. The mediation function remains significantly underutilized and structurally limited. The current College of Mediators relies on retired staff serving on a voluntary basis without standardized selection procedures or mandatory professional mediation training. The planned roll-out of a formal ombudsman function represents a critical opportunity to professionalize mediation services within a coherent internal justice architecture.

Appeals processes and the ILO Administrative Tribunal

The UNESCO Appeals Board has undergone major reform. Between early 2023 and mid-2025, the case backlog dropped dramatically, annual case output increased significantly, and digital case management was introduced. Annual reporting to the Executive Board has strengthened accountability, and access to external legal representation before the Appeals Board was approved effective 1 January 2026.

Despite these improvements, the Appeals Board remains structurally under-resourced and procedural delays persist, with hearings exceeding statutory timelines. Under the current model, the Board issues non-binding recommendations, with final authority resting with the Director-General. The absence of a presumptive obligation to follow Appeals Board recommendations may affect perceptions of transparency and predictability.

Between January 2024 and July 2025, UNESCO faced 29 judgments from the ILO Administrative Tribunal, with a decline in success rate and financial liabilities amounting to nearly $364,000 in compensation and settlements. Adverse judgments were largely due to procedural noncompliance and legal errors, underscoring the need for strengthened compliance and early dispute resolution.

Human resources management

UNESCO has made progress in strengthening its human resources framework, including structured recruitment, expanded staff development, and efforts to promote diversity and gender balance. These achievements reflect commitment to building a more inclusive and globally representative workforce. However, systemic challenges remain. Lack of comprehensive workforce planning and the perceived weakening of institutional checks and balances have reduced consistency, transparency and perceived fairness. Limited safeguards with regard to recruitment, promotions and mobility, coupled with fragmented oversight, have constrained accountability and affected staff confidence. The review identified patterns of inconsistent application of procedures, insufficient documentation of selection decisions, limited managerial accountability, high vacancy rates (particularly in field operations), and the use of ad hoc workarounds. These practices undermine the integrity of human resources systems and expose UNESCO to reputational and legal risks.

Financial model

UNESCO has strengthened its financial framework through the resource mobilization strategy for the period 2024–2025, which is intended to enhance diversification and predictability. The financial model has evolved, with voluntary contributions now central to operational viability. Partnerships have shifted from a support role to a strategic function, driving delivery, visibility and influence, and reflecting reliance on external collaboration to sustain programmes and enhance global impact. However, structural challenges persist. The Division of Partnerships remains within the Bureau of Strategic Planning, a placement that no longer reflects its strategic role, limiting its ability to fully leverage partnerships as a driver of sustainability. In addition, rigid budgeting processes and insufficiently risk-informed budget planning continue to constrain financial resilience.

Partnerships

UNESCO's partnership ecosystem extends beyond financial collaboration to advocacy, policy influence and knowledge exchange. However, the Organization lacks a methodology to measure the impact of non-financial partnerships. The absence of standardized metrics and reporting mechanisms hampers institutional learning, accountability and visibility of results achieved through advocacy and policy partnerships.

Staff engagement and organizational culture

The review found a significant decline in staff engagement and morale at UNESCO, with employee engagement dropping from 70 per cent in 2021 to 50 per cent in 2024 and well-being indicators also deteriorating. Half of staff reported frequent stress, confidence in the fairness of misconduct case handling remains low, and a notable proportion of respondents reported experiences of discrimination, harassment or abuse of authority, with women consistently reporting less positive experiences than men. Perceptions of inequity in career advancement, limited transparency, weak meritocracy and low trust in leadership continue to undermine staff confidence. A top-heavy staffing structure, combined with operational understaffing and reliance on temporary and affiliate personnel, has further contributed to frustration and declining morale, prompting the report to call for a review of workforce allocations and stronger institutional safeguards to enhance fairness and accountability.

What the JIU concludes

The review underscores the need for UNESCO to move beyond managing institutional decline and embrace a transformative governance and accountability model grounded in transparency, strategic coherence and ethical leadership. The sustainability of UNESCO will depend on its ability to re-establish institutional checks and balances, modernize structures, address capacity gaps, professionalize integrity functions and rebuild trust among staff and Member States. Strengthened risk governance, clearer accountability frameworks and improved coordination between Headquarters and the field will be essential to restoring effectiveness, credibility and relevance in a rapidly evolving global context.

What the JIU recommends
(formal recommendations)

The report contains 13 formal recommendations:
Addressed to the Executive Board (7):

1 Request the Director-General to design and implement a centralized digital platform to track Executive Board decisions and General Conference resolutions, assign responsibilities, and monitor implementation in real time. This system should be complemented by mandatory progress reporting and integrated into the performance evaluations of the Assistant Directors-General, in their capacity as heads of the sectors.

2 Develop and propose to the General Conference the adoption of a comprehensive governance reform. This reform should include: the preparation of thematic agendas to prioritize substantive issues; the implementation of secure electronic voting systems, subject to budget availability; the establishment of protocols for remote participation, when necessary, to ensure informed decision-making; the development of consultation mechanisms between sessions of the Board and the General Conference; and a revision of the terms of reference of the Preparatory Group of the Executive Board to better align its responsibilities with current needs.

3 Task the open-ended working group established at the 43rd session of the General Conference to submit its recommendations to the Executive Board at its 225th session. These recommendations should be aimed at: (a) ensuring the adoption of proposals related to the working methods of the Executive Board at the 225th session; and (b) finalizing proposals concerning the working methods of the General Conference for submission at the 44th session of the General Conference. The recommendations should be firmly anchored in the UNESCO Basic Texts and include updated terms of reference, a decision-making matrix and a biennial review mechanism.

4 Formalize structured engagement with executive leadership. This entails ensuring the Director-General's regular participation in Board sessions, supported by clear communication protocols and joint planning processes.

6 Consider adopting a regulatory framework to govern internal candidacies for the post of Director-General. This framework may include provisions such as mandatory leave during the candidacy period, ethical conduct guidelines or disclosure requirements, all overseen by an independent mechanism to ensure impartiality and compliance.

7 Adopt a decision requiring that all Cabinet-level appointments recruited externally be contractually tied to the tenure of the serving Director-General. Any transition into the permanent workforce of UNESCO must be subject to open, competitive recruitment in full compliance with the Staff Regulations.

8 Request the Director-General to establish an independent task force by the end of 2026 to undertake a comprehensive institutional review, aimed at enhancing the organizational effectiveness, strategic alignment and operational coherence of UNESCO. This review should be anchored in three strategic pillars:

- Mandate consolidation: refocus efforts on areas where UNESCO holds clear normative leadership and comparative advantage
- Structural realignment: restructure the Organization to eliminate duplication, foster intersectoral collaboration and improve coherence
- Enhanced coordination and delivery: strengthen mechanisms for integrated planning, monitoring and evaluation to ensure measurable impact

What the JIU recommends
(formal recommendations)

The report contains 13 formal recommendations:
Addressed to the Director-General (6):

5 Initiate a comprehensive strengthening of the Secretariat of the Governing Bodies by increasing its staffing capacity and instituting formal impartiality safeguards to ensure transparent, efficient and trusted governance processes.

9 Reposition the Sector for Administration and Management as a proactive partner in all phases of the programme cycle, from planning to evaluation, by adopting a sector-wide strategy and establishing shared service standards, performance indicators and workflow automation.

10 Establish a centralized coordination mechanism, modelled on the former Bureau of Field Coordination, to serve as the principal interface between Headquarters and field offices. This entity must have clear authority to harmonize support functions, streamline engagement and ensure timely, accountable service delivery.

11 Review vacant posts and overall workforce allocations to address staffing gaps at operational levels and improve workload distribution, including by prioritizing P-3 and P-4 posts that are critical for programme delivery over non-essential senior positions, where appropriate.

12 Design and implement a unified internal communication strategy to ensure consistent, inclusive and accountable engagement across the Organization.

13 Reposition the Division for Partnerships and external relations within the same structure, with a direct reporting line to the Assistant Director-General or the Deputy Director-General, by no later than the end of 2027.

Informal recommendations

In addition to the formal recommendations, the Inspector makes 39 informal recommendations throughout the narrative. Here below are the top 10 most important informal recommendations:

- Strategic Relevance & Programme Realignment (Informal Rec. 1). Launch a comprehensive assessment of all intergovernmental programmes to evaluate strategic relevance and alignment with the C/5, followed by a systemic realignment initiative.

  Foundational for restoring coherence, ensuring UNESCO delivers on its core mandate and eliminating outdated or low-impact activities.

- Rebalancing Normative & Operational Functions (Informal Rec. 3). Adopt an integrated approach that aligns field activities with UNESCO's normative role and unique value proposition.

  Addresses the chronic tension between operations and normative leadership, strengthening global influence.

- Strengthening Decentralization & Field Network Capacity (Informal Rec. 7). Conduct a network-wide staffing assessment, standardize roles and harmonize grading.

  Field reform is one of UNESCO's biggest structural weaknesses; this recommendation directly targets organizational effectiveness.

- United Nations Country Team Integration (Informal Rec. 9). Develop institutional policy and operational guidance for engagement with UNCTs and train offices to integrate UNESCO mandates into UNSDCFs.

  UNESCO's performance at country level depends on this; currently a major gap affecting credibility within the UN system.

- Strategy–Budget–Results Alignment (Informal Rec. 10). Institutionalize bottom-up planning, rebuild budget structures around outcomes, and embed RBM into budget and performance processes.

  Critical for ending fragmentation between planning, budgeting and delivery—one of UNESCO's core governance challenges.

- Human Resources Reform – Regulatory Framework (Informal Rec. 15/16 combined). Revise and consolidate the HR Manual, clearly defining all appointment modalities, with full transparency, oversight and safeguards against misuse.

  Directly addresses longstanding transparency concerns and restores trust in HR integrity.

- Performance Management Reform (Informal Rec. 17 & 18). Strengthen performance management, link mobility and performance indicators to appraisals, and integrate 360degree feedback.

  UNESCO's weak performance culture is a systemic barrier to reform; this is essential for accountability.

- Enterprise Risk Management Strengthening (Informal Rec. 29 & 30 combined). Establish a seniorled risk management committee, elevate the risk officer, update the risk register, and integrate risk practices across planning/budgeting.

  Risk management is foundational for governance, resource allocation, and avoiding operational failures.

- Strengthening Internal Controls & Field Oversight (Informal Rec. 31). Institutionalize a centralized internal control toolkit, strengthen administrative coherence, and introduce regular monitoring across offices.

  Addresses persistent internal control weaknesses, especially in the field, with system-wide implications for accountability.

- Evaluation & Results-Based Management Strengthening (Informal Rec. 32). Institutionalize outcome-level indicators, formalize regional evaluation roles in quality assurance, publish decentralized evaluations, and link evaluation findings to resource allocation.

  Strengthens the evidence base for decisionmaking and consolidates RBM culture.

These informal recommendations aim to reinforce institutional coherence, accountability and strategic alignment beyond the scope of the formal recommendations.

Approach & Methodology

In accordance with the JIU Statute, internal standards and working procedures, a range of qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods from different sources were used to ensure the consistency, validity and reliability of the findings. The review employed qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods, including:

- **Extensive desk review**
- **Corporate questionnaire on administrative functions**
- **Five targeted surveys (Member States, field representatives, staff, administrative officers and category 1 institutes)**
- **Stakeholder surveys of Executive Board members**
- **On-site visits at Headquarters and field office**
- **Virtual interviews and online surveys**

The review assessed reforms introduced since 2011, with particular emphasis on developments during the leadership tenure beginning in 2017.

2024-2025 JIU Reports and Notes

Reports:

JIU/REP/2025/6 & **JIU/REP/2025/6** [Expanded report]
Review of the Health Services in the United Nations system

JIU/REP/2025/5 & **JIU/REP/2025/5** [Expanded report]
Review of the Ombudsman and Mediation function in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2025/4 (Comparative analysis) & **JIU/REP/2025/4** [Expanded report] (Comparative tables),
Review of the policies and practices for determining the rates of programme support costs in organizations of the United Nations system

JIU/REP/2025/3 & **JIU/REP/2025/3** [Expanded report],
Review of donor-led assessments of United Nations system organizations and other oversight-related requests from donors in the context of funding agreements and the United Nations single audit principle

JIU/REP/2025/2 & **JIU/REP/2025/2** [Expanded report],
Review of policies and practices to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2025/1 & **JIU/REP/2025/1** [Expanded report],
Review of management and administration in the United Nations Environment Programme

JIU/REP/2024/4, Review of the implementation of the principle of mutual recognition within the United Nations system

JIU/REP/2024/3 Part I (Comparative analysis) & **JIU/REP/2024/3** Part II (Reference tables),
Budgeting in organizations of the United Nations system Part II (Reference tables)

JIU/REP/2024/2, Review of consideration of and action taken on the reports and recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit by United Nations system organizations

JIU/REP/2024/1, Review of management and administration in the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women)

For all reports visit: https://www.unjiu.org/content/reports

Notes:

JIU/NOTE/2024/2, Note to the International Telecommunication Union from the review of the quality, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of health insurance schemes in the United Nations system organizations

JIU/NOTE/2024/1, Note to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees from the review of quality, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of health insurance schemes in the United Nations system organizations

For all notes visit: https://www.unjiu.org/content/notes

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