REFERENCE CHECKS IN UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS

Prepared by

Papa Louis Fall
Nikolay Chulkov

Joint Inspection Unit
Geneva 2013

United Nations

REFERENCE CHECKS IN UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS

Prepared by

Papa Louis Fall
Nikolay Chulkov

Joint Inspection Unit

United Nations, Geneva 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reference checks in United Nations system organizations
JIU/NOTE/2013/1

Complementing and building on the findings of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) report and notes on staff recruitment, the present note is aimed at assessing issues of efficiency and effectiveness in the reference checking process and providing recommendations for its enhancement as well as its standardization and harmonization across the United Nations system. The term "reference checks" in this note represents all the types of checks that are performed or should be performed to verify references and statements that external candidates have made on their educational, professional and any other background when applying for fixed-term posts of one year or more in United Nations system organizations.

Main findings and conclusions

The Inspectors found that most organizations lack adequate administrative instruments for guiding their recruiters in conducting reference checks. Furthermore, the responsibility for reference checks is not clearly delineated and the actors involved are not adequately informed, trained and supported.

The review of current practices indicates that reference checks are not conducted in a thorough, systematic and timely manner, and their results are not properly documented and stored. In many cases the recruitment process is completed without reference checks having been previously concluded.

The Inspectors identified as a good practice in achieving better results the recruiting individuals' or entities' specialization in reference checking.

Benchmarks

In line with the benchmarks on staff recruitment of the earlier reviews of JIU (JIU/REP/2012/4 and JIU/NOTE/2012/2), the Inspectors recommended a set of six benchmarks to be used by the organizations as standard criteria for conducting reference checks, proposing that:

- Reference checks become mandatory for all external candidates hired to fixed-term positions of one year or more irrespective of the category, level and location of the position (Benchmark 3);

- Reference checks be conducted in a thorough, systematic and timely manner, in writing, from the recommendation stage of the selection process, and include a combination of different types of checks (Benchmark 4 and 5);

- The completion of reference checks be duly documented, reviewed and certified prior to concluding the recruitment process (Benchmark 6);

- Reference checks be regulated through the issuance of administrative instruments on recruitment which include specific guidance on and requirements of reference checks (Benchmark 1);

- Roles and responsibilities be assigned to all actors involved and human resources services be responsible for managing the overall process (Benchmark 2).

Recommendations

The present note includes two recommendations designed to strengthen system-wide coherence through the adoption of the proposed benchmarks, and thereby ensure the dissemination of good practices and standardization of reference checks across the system.

JIU invites the executive heads of the United Nations system organizations to adopt the benchmarks set out in the present note with a view to ensuring that their respective organizations have sound reference checking procedures, and to report progress made to the legislative/governing bodies. (Recommendation 1)

JIU also calls for the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, through the High-level Committee on Management, taking into account the benchmarks set out in the present note, to facilitate the standardization and harmonization of reference checking procedures across the system with a view to further support inter-agency mobility and the One United Nations goal. (Recommendation 2)

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

CEB	United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination
DFS	Department of Field Support
DPKO	Department of Peacekeeping Operations
DSS	Department of Safety and Security
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FPD	Field Personnel Division
GSC	Global Service Centre
HLCM	High-level Committee on Management
HRM	human resources management
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IAU	International Association of Universities
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMO	International Maritime Organization
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
JIU	Joint Inspection Unit
OHRM	Office of Human Resources Management
RVU	Reference Verification Unit
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
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
UNGSC	United Nations Global Service Centre
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOG	United Nations Office at Geneva
UNON	United Nations Office at Nairobi
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNOV	United Nations Office at Vienna
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UN-Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNWTO	World Tourism Organization
UPU	Universal Postal Union
WBG	World Bank Group
WFP	World Food Programme
WHED	World Higher Education Database
WHO	World Health Organization
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
WMO	World Meteorological Organization

I. INTRODUCTION

1. As part of its programme of work for 2012, the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) conducted a review of the reference check process in United Nations system organizations. The review stems from a suggestion made by the United Nations Department of Field Support (DFS), and builds on the findings of the previous JIU review on staff recruitment in United Nations system organizations, in particular those contained in its overview of the comparative analysis and benchmarking framework (JIU/REP/2012/4) and in the note on the recruitment process (JIU/NOTE/2012/2, para. 66).

A. Objective and methodology

2. The objective of the present review is to complement the overview of the staff recruitment process, assessing issues of efficiency and effectiveness in the reference checking process in the context of the diverse needs of United Nations system organizations. It reviews relevant rules, policies and procedures across the system, and delivers a comparative analysis that identifies commonalities and differences, as well as good practices.

3. The review covered 26 United Nations organizations/entities that have accepted the JIU statute. In accordance with the internal standards and guidelines of JIU and its internal working procedures, the methodology followed in preparing the present note included a preliminary desk review, questionnaires, interviews and in-depth analysis. All the JIU participating organizations, with the exception of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sent detailed replies to the questionnaires. Interviews were conducted with officials from organizations/offices and with staff representatives in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Paris, Rome and Brindisi. The team visited the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and interviewed human resources management (HRM) officials as well as staff representatives of the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in Addis Ababa. The Inspectors also consulted the World Bank Group (WBG) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

4. Based on the research and findings, the Inspectors have identified good practices and recommended a set of six benchmarks to be used by the organizations as standard criteria for conducting reference checks. These benchmarks are in line with and supplement those proposed by JIU in its note on recruitment.

5. Comments from JIU participating organizations on the draft were sought and taken into account in finalizing the present note. In accordance with article 11, paragraph 2, of the JIU statute, the note was finalized after consultation among the Inspectors so as to test their conclusions and recommendations against the collective wisdom of the Unit.

6. To facilitate the handling of the present note and the implementation of recommendations and the monitoring thereof, annex II contains a table indicating whether the note is submitted to the organizations concerned for action or for information. The table identifies those recommendations relevant for each organization, specifying whether they require a decision by the legislative or governing body of the organization or can be acted upon by its executive head.

B. Definition, scope and types of reference checks

7. Reference checking is a necessary step in the staff recruitment process; it contributes to securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity in the employment of the

staff of the organization, as called for by the Charter of the United Nations in Article 101, paragraph 3. The term "reference checks" in the present note represents all the types of checks that are performed or should be performed to verify references and statements made by external candidates on their educational and professional background, as well as on any other background, when applying for fixed-term posts of one year or more in United Nations system organizations. The feedback received and analysed by the recruiters allows them to determine: (a) whether the information provided by the external candidates on their educational and professional background, experience, competencies and qualifications was accurate and verifiable, and (b) whether the external candidates meet the job requirements and are suitable for the post. Reference checks also help in identifying and predicting the needs of applicants for future training or developmental opportunities.

8. The process entails direct communication of the recruiter with persons and entities able to provide factual data and opinions about the external candidates' qualifications, competences and past performance at the workplace and elsewhere.[1]

9. Reference checks can be time consuming, but as underlined in the JIU staff recruitment report, such significant investment is justified in order to select the right external candidate - the costs of hiring the wrong people are even more significant,[2] and damaging for the United Nations.

10. In both the public and private sectors, reference checks are categorized by type. The most common are educational-background, employment-background (including competencies, memberships and discipline), character and security checks.

11. Educational background checks primarily verify whether candidates are holders of valid educational certificates and/or degrees from an accredited/recognized institution as declared in their application. One part of the check is the physical presentation of the original certificate or degree by the candidates whenever they are requested to do so during the recruitment process. Another part requires the recruiters to check whether the educational institutions that issued the credentials are accredited/recognized, and to validate the candidates' dates of attendance and graduation, exact titles of certifications or degrees obtained, major subjects studied and honours received.[3]

12. Employment background checks verify with previous employers, supervisors, or peers and human resources services the references provided in the employment history part of the application submitted by the candidates at the application stage. These sources may confirm information about external candidates as regards their employment period, job performance, work ethics, work attendance, attitudes, competences and salary, as well as other job-related elements set as criteria to evaluate candidates for a specific position.[4] Memberships in professional boards, associations and networks, as well as publications connected to the candidates' professional qualifications, may also be checked, if they are clearly stipulated in the job description's requirements and indispensable for the function of the post.

---

[1] See Association of Executive Search Consultants, "Contrôle des références et des antécédents" (2009). Available from www.executivesearchconnect.com/eweb/docs/aesc/industrystandards/french/Reference_Background_Checking-French.pdf.

[2] See JIU/REP/2012/4, para. 4, citing www.ransonassociates.co.uk/hrprocesses.htm. See also www.experian.co.uk/background -checking/why-background-check.html.

[3] See www.amof.info/education.htm.

[4] See http://jobsearch.about.com/od/backgroundcheck/Background_Checks_Verification.htm.

13. <u>Competency-based reference checks</u> are based on definitions of the competencies (i.e., integrated knowledge, set of behavioural skills, judgement and attributes) and accompanying behavioural indicators that the recruiter is looking for and has announced in the vacancy. The information gathered is the basis on which ratings are assigned. Competencies can be rated against a variety of scale types.[5] A behavioural/competency-based reference check verifies the information that a candidate has provided during a behavioural/competency-based interview.

14. <u>Character or personal checks</u> are the checks conducted on the candidates' personality facets and integrity with persons who are familiar with their character, ethics and qualifications. In addition to the three persons presented by the candidates as "referees", any other persons contacted by the recruiters for the same purposes qualify also as character or personal referees. External candidates are expected to list as their referees the most prominent among the persons they know as indicative of their social or professional milieu, but also only the ones who think highly of the candidates.

15. <u>Disciplinary record checks</u> verify whether candidates have been the subject of disciplinary measures or have disciplinary cases pending consideration by competent bodies (namely the United Nations system administrative tribunals for staff members of organizations).

16. <u>Security checks</u> cover identification, criminal, commercial and financial (for example bankruptcy or credit) records.[6] These checks are conducted to ascertain integrity – how reliable and trustworthy a candidate is.[7] Checks of financial status assist recruiters in assessing whether candidates are able to manage well all their financial obligations, if the post's function requires this ability. Certificates of criminal records show candidates' compliance with the law.[8] Convictions and sanctions do not preclude candidates from selection: the nature of the offence, the circumstances and the number of years passed since the offence was committed are taken into consideration.

17. The Inspectors wish to express their appreciation to all who assisted them in the preparation of this review, and particularly to those who participated in the interviews and so willingly shared their knowledge and expertise.

---

[5] See Public Service Commission of Canada, "Structured Reference Checking", www.psc-cfp.gc.ca/plcy-pltq/guides/checking-verification/index-eng.htm#toc28.

[6] The security check definition used in the present review does not include "security clearance" sought by other international organizations, such as the European Union, its agencies, missions and operations, when recruiting external candidates (see Commission Decision of 29 November 2001 on internal Rules and Procedures, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, No. L 317/50, 3 December 2001). The European Union recruiters request security screening of external candidates by the security authorities of the country of their nationality. Following this screening, the authorities clear their national by an administrative decision certifying to the European Union that the national concerned may be allowed to access classified information up to a specified level (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32001D0844:EN:HTML).

[7] See www.intelligence.gov/careers-in-intelligence/background-clearance.html and https://www.cia.gov/careers/application-process/index.html.

[8] See www.oneclickhr.com/refcheckbasic/ and www.jobsearch.about.com.

II.   NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK AND ACTORS

A. Charter of the United Nations, Staff Regulations and Rules, policies, guidelines and procedures

---

Benchmark 1

Written promulgated recruitment rules, policies, guidelines and procedures include specific detailed guidance and requirements to conduct and document the reference checking process, including the types of checks required in each instance, methods to perform them, outcome and responsibilities of the actors involved.

This requires that:

(a)   Human resources services draft new administrative instruments on reference checks in line with benchmarks 1 to 6 of the present note;

(b)   The new instruments are incorporated in the written procedures on recruitment;

(c)   The new instruments are presented to the organizations' legislative/governing bodies.

18. The Charter of the United Nations states 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" (Art. 101, para. 3). This is further incorporated in the staff regulations and rules at United Nations system organizations.

19. United Nations Staff Regulation 1.2, paragraph (b), establishes the aforementioned principles as core values of the Secretariat, funds and programmes. The concept of integrity includes truthfulness in all matters affecting staff members' work and status. Accordingly, Rule 1.5 holds staff members accountable for supplying the Secretary-General with accurate and complete information both during the application process and on subsequent employment, for the purpose of determining their status.[9]

20. The United Nations system organizations, with the exception of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO), have promulgated similar rules requiring staff members to supply accurate and complete information on appointment. The requested and supplied information concerns facts relating to the period prior to the staff member's appointment that are relevant to his or her suitability for the current post.

21. The official documents by which United Nations organizations collect information about candidates' professional and educational background, personal referees, and their compliance with the law, are the standard personal history, online profile or curricula vitae forms. They are filled out and submitted by candidates at the time of application. With the submission of these forms candidates are normally requested to certify with their manual or electronic signatures that the statements they have made on the forms are true, complete and accurate. This way the forms become the authoritative sources for reference checking.

---

[9] ST/SGB/2011/1.

22. Some HRM officials suggested that the organizations need to revisit the personal history profile, online and curricula vitae forms, and redesign them to better serve the purpose of background verification and facilitate the reference checking process. The Inspectors view this opinion positively. Given that these forms are the basis for reference checks, they should collect and reflect all the elements and information that needs to be verified during the reference checking process.

23. Most organizations lack administrative written procedures that guide the recruiters on how to conduct reference checks. The existing administrative instruments on recruitment at some organizations (for example, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)) contain only a few lines on reference checks as a step in their selection process. The guidelines on recruitment used by the United Nations and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) do not mention the reference checking process at all. Other organizations that were in the process of reviewing their recruitment policies confirmed that provisions on the reference checking process would be included in the revised text (for example, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Universal Postal Union (UPU) and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)).

24. Only three organizations in the United Nations system have formulated separate guidelines on the reference checking process: UNICEF, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and UNIDO. UNIDO has reportedly been using, since 2005, an internal document that contains guidelines on both employment and academic reference checks. In 2008, UNICEF introduced an administrative instruction on presentation of academic degrees that applies to its entire staff, and since 2011 its recruiters have been guided by an internal document on best practices of employment reference checks. In 2009, UNESCO annexed to its Human Resources Manual a document entitled "Guidelines: how to take reference checks" which, however, refers solely to employment checks. (See annex I.)

25. The United Nations Secretariat, as well as its departments and offices with delegated recruitment authority, except the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), until recently have been conducting employment and educational background verification based exclusively on established practices. The Instructional Manual for the Recruiter on the Staff Selection System (Inspira [10]), published in 2011 and updated in 2012 by the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM), mentioned the verification of those types of background. However, while reference checks were mentioned as a necessary step of the selection process in various sections of the publication, there was no explanation of the process itself. During the review, the Department of Management shared with the Inspectors two successive draft OHRM handbooks on background verification. The first draft, entitled "Verification of Qualifications Handbook", was superseded by a second draft, entitled "Guidelines on Verification of Educational Qualification and Employment History", prepared in April 2012 and last updated in June 2012.

26. The draft guidelines that describe in detail how HRM staff should verify the educational and employment background of applicants will be applicable also in recruitment cases handled by the DFS Field Personnel Division (FPD). The latter contributed to the finalization of the draft

---

[10] "Inspira" is the short name of the new online staff recruitment system of the Secretariat, launched in early 2010, which has gradually replaced the "Galaxy" system. (The latter has remained in parallel use for some job openings in peacekeeping and political affairs missions.)

guidelines, and has been working closely with OHRM since August 2011, when DFS/FPD started to also use the OHRM templates for background checks. HRM officials at DFS indicated that since 2008 they have been guided by the DPKO Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) entitled "Recruitment of candidates for UN peace operations". That SOP has been set aside, and is planned to be replaced by the SOP of February 2012, prepared by DFS/FPD, entitled "Staff Selection System for Peacekeeping Operations and Special Political Missions", which was still a draft at the time of the present review.

27.   Given the growing body of jurisprudence in which United Nations administrative tribunals have rejected internal documents of the organization as not valid and not binding, it is in the interest of the organizations to have enforceable administrative instruments on reference checks in case of dispute before these tribunals. This requires that the procedures on reference checks do not remain internal documents, and that they be promulgated along with the instruments on recruitment.

28. The suggested promulgation option, if adopted, will also contribute to satisfying the staff representatives' demand for more transparency throughout the system, given that during the present review the staff representatives of most organizations were found to be unaware of important details and outcomes of the reference checking process in their organizations.

B. Actors: responsibilities and arrangements

> **Benchmark 2**
>
> **The recruitment procedures assign roles and responsibilities to all the actors involved in different steps of the reference checking process and make human resources services responsible for managing the overall process.**

This entails that:

(a) Human resources services guide all actors with written issuances that clearly state the responsibilities of different actors at all steps of the reference checking process;

(b) Training on recruitment for hiring managers undertaking reference checks include a specific module on reference checking procedures and practices; human resources officials receive specific training beyond hands-on or on-the-job training;

(c) The application forms and/or the personal history forms incorporate a liabilities release agreement, by which the candidates authorize the organization to make inquiries on their background and agree to release both the organization and the respondents to these inquiries from any legal claim and liability;

(d) The manually or electronically signed release agreement forms or relevant application excerpts accompany the organizations' requests for information on the candidates.

29. At each organization the different actors involved in the process (the applicants themselves as well as the recruiters, that is, human resources officials or hiring managers) have different kinds and levels of responsibilities. UNRWA, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNFPA and UNICEF administrative issuances on recruitment explicitly attribute "responsibility", "accountability" or "diligence required" to those who manage the reference checking process within the respective organizations. The Inspectors believe that the recruitment procedures of all the organizations should clearly delineate in detail the roles and subsequent responsibilities of each of these actors. Officials involved in the process must be guided by

instruments that clearly outline their responsibilities for each step of the process, and be given appropriate training and support.

Applicants

30. Best practices call for informing external candidates at the application stage about the reference check procedure and its implications in their recruitment process, and explaining what kind of cooperation is expected from them and at which step. Candidates can be involved in the process without compromising its integrity, for instance with regard to, inter alia, updating contact details of persons or entities that should be contacted, and collecting certificates of criminal records. Informing candidates early about reference checks helps expedite the process, as this may facilitate HRM or recruiters' communication with appropriate sources of information on the personal history of candidates.

31. The verification of information submitted by external candidates requires direct communication with the candidates' referees, former employers, educational institutions and/or other sources of information/documentation. This direct communication is sometimes impeded by personal data protection laws as well as by a reluctance to disclose information and provide opinions that might have legal consequences for the discloser. The declared confidential nature of the communication has proven to be insufficient to overcome these obstacles. As a result, reference checks are delayed or remain incomplete.

32. UNDP and UN-Women include at the end of their personal history forms a special section in which candidates are requested to authorize, by their signature, the respective organization and its agent to verify information on the candidates' backgrounds, allowing respective former employers and educational institutions to provide such information to the organization. The same signed section of both the UNDP and UN-Women personal history forms also releases the parties providing information from any liability in doing so. Thus, simultaneously to the submission of their application, candidates expressly authorize the respective organization to conduct reference checks on them.

33. The United Nations OHRM has designed a liability release agreement form that candidates are presented with for signature before the reference checking process begins. By signing the form, candidates authorize the organization to make inquiries on their background and agree to "release, hold harmless and indemnify" educational institutions and former employers, as well as the United Nations, including its agents and employees, from any claims and liabilities that may arise pursuant to the result of responding to the inquiries made. This liability release agreement is also used by DFS and the United Nations Office at Vienna (UNOV)/United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), but it is not used by the remaining United Nations Secretariat departments and entities reviewed (for example, Department of Safety and Security (DSS)/Executive Office, United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON), United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) and UNECA).

34. The World Food Programme (WFP) also uses a consent form by which candidates authorize the educational institutions to provide information without a liabilities release. UNHCR reported that it asked for the candidates' consent by e-mail, without any standard form.

35. Nevertheless, the Inspectors observed that, when the said organizations/offices communicate with persons and institutions referenced in applications to request information about the employment and educational background of candidates, they do not present them with the candidates' signed authorization/consent forms and liabilities waivers. The Inspectors believe that

if these signed forms accompanied the organizations' requests for information, they would facilitate the parties' response.

36. The Inspectors find that the content of the United Nations OHRM agreement form is the most appropriate for all organizations, given that this model protects the organization's interests. Its text explicitly names the organization and its employees in the list of parties that the candidates release from any liability for collecting information on their background. Notwithstanding the above, the Inspectors consider that the organizations do not need to make candidates sign a separate form; organizations should, however, follow the UNDP practice of incorporating the agreement into the personal history profile, online or curriculum vitae form submitted along with a candidate's application.

Recruiters: human resources officials or hiring managers

37. In most organizations the responsibility for verifying background information is divided among HRM officials and hiring managers. At UNDP the process is both centralized and decentralized, with shared responsibility: HRM officials are in charge of the reference checking process for senior leadership positions that are centrally managed at its New York headquarters, but they delegate the entire process and all the checks for the remaining categories of posts to the managers concerned at the 146 UNDP country offices and another four headquarters locations.

38. Only in eight organizations (United Nations, UNRWA, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), ICAO, IMO, International Telecommunication Union (ITU), UPU and WIPO) do HRM officials have exclusive responsibility for background verification, with the exception of some specific background checks conducted by the DSS Executive Office at the United Nations or occasionally by technical departments at IAEA. At the other extreme, at UNESCO and FAO, only the hiring managers concerned perform employment reference checks.

39. At some United Nations system organizations, dedicated and trained human resources teams that deal only with reference checking are able to complete the process in two weeks on average, although they perform more detailed educational reference checks than others. (See annex I).]

40. At WFP headquarters, the Recruitment and Reassignment Branch is charged with certifying university diplomas of selected candidates applying for international professional category posts under fixed-term contracts. The Branch is tasked with contacting academic institutions to request them to certify in writing that their records show that a selected candidate has studied and graduated from their school, and with following up with ministries of education on other certification issues. HRM at WFP reported that this Branch has managed to complete such checks within 14 calendar days.

41. The United Nations DFS, UNHCR and WHO have also taken the entire reference checking process or part of it away from the recruiters, offshoring it to specialized HRM teams located at their respective Global Service Centres (GSC). WHO has entrusted the verification of educational credentials to an HRM team based in its GSC in Kuala Lumpur since 2008, when its new global management system was introduced. However, in practice, the off-shored team was unable to check original diplomas of newly appointed staff outside Kuala Lumpur; for those checks the organization still had to rely on verifications made by local WHO HRM officials at the regional level. At the time of the present review, although WHO has decided to return this task to recruiters, until the implementation of the decision the HRM team at the GSC continues to be in charge of educational checks.

42. Since 2008, UNHCR has assigned all types of reference checks to an HRM Unit that was moved out of its Geneva-based headquarters and relocated to the Budapest-based GSC. The HRM Unit head reported that the Unit had coped well with its global role in the reference checking for the recruitment cases of the entire organization in parallel with other recruitment tasks, due to the fact that the number of external candidates hired by UNHCR is quite low (on average 250 external candidates per year), in line with its policy of filling vacancies with internal placements.

43. Conversely, the offshored HRM team for United Nations DFS/FPD, which is charged exclusively with reference checking, has had to process a very high number of incoming or pending recruitment cases (an average of 1,000 reported candidates per year). The offshored HRM Reference Verification Unit (RVU) was established in 2007 as a DFS pilot project hosted by the Brindisi-based United Nations Logistics Base. This project, which has been operating for the past five years, was conceived to establish a team at global level tasked with checking employment and educational references of candidates for peacekeeping operations and special political missions.

44. From 2007 to date, RVU has gained valuable experience in its area of specialization, namely, conducting reference checks. According to RVU staff interviewed, this specialization allowed them to build networks and a solid database and gain knowledge that enabled them to improve the timeliness of their checks, reducing the time taken from the initial 32 days to 16 days. However, the present status and future of RVU as a DFS/FPD project is unclear despite the positive results. The General Assembly recently rejected the planned transfer of RVU from Brindisi to Valencia and maintained the temporary character of the posts of the Unit.[11] Currently, RVU staff has a dual reporting line, because although the Unit depends on DFS strategic planning, it remains an integral part of the United Nations Logistics Base – which is being reprofiled as the United Nations Global Service Centre (UNGSC) – to which it reports operationally.

45. The Inspectors consider that the specialization of the United Nations RVU in checking references and the WFP Recruitment and Reassignment Branch in certifying diplomas constitute good practices given their positive results. These models should be examined and developed further across the system and the knowledge gained should be safeguarded.

46. A good option would be to create a system-wide entity specialized in reference checking. This task could be assigned to the United Nations RVU, on the basis of the exposure and knowledge it has gained in reference checking at global level; the capacity of the existing team could be upgraded and reinforced to absorb the needs of other organizations' checks on a fee-payment basis. Alternatively, the Unit could become a focal point for training similar "antenna" teams which would implement the methods of the Unit across the system.

Training

47. Most organizations consider that training on conducting reference checks is not necessary. Arguments invoked against such training include: that reference checking is a routine recruitment task, therefore, it requires no special skills; and that human resources experience, common sense, discretion and knowledge of the rules and familiarity with procedures are sufficient for performing such checks. For example, both UNFPA and UNICEF mention that the training for competency-based interviewing is sufficient for officials who conduct competency-based

---

[11] General Assembly resolution 66/266, para. 2, including footnote 2 referring to recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions contained in A/66/718/Add.15, paras. 48 and 54.

reference checks. However, most HRM officials interviewed have stated that the reference checking entails an approach that requires specific techniques and skills.

48. Some organizations, such as WFP, OHRM, UNIDO and IAEA, provide in-house, hands-on or on-the-job training for their HRM staff. Staff of RVU, the United Nations centralized reference check unit of DFS, undergoes specific training. Trained RVU staff have provided training on reference checks to UNDP, United Nations Volunteers, and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. IMO human resources staff receives training on how to operate the online tool used by IMO for reference checking.

Alternative arrangements: outsourcing

49. UNDP is the first and only (at the time of the present review) United Nations system organization to have outsourced reference checks. Since 2010 it has entrusted part of its educational background reference checks to private companies based in the United States of America.[12] Only recommended candidates whose academic credentials are in doubt are screened. According to the company pricing list provided, the standard fees charged for domestic checks of degrees issued by American universities is US$ 12, with checks taking one to two days only, while international checks take longer and cost more. The hired private company has to face and overcome exactly the same problems and delays as United Nations system organizations when for verification purposes they have to contact foreign academic institutions overseas.

50. The United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) will soon follow as the second organization to outsource reference checks, once the launched procurement process for selecting a private company is completed. IMO has stated that it is seriously considering outsourcing reference checks, having already identified some potentially suitable private companies. UNFPA, UNICEF and the United Nations are closely monitoring the UNDP outsourcing experience as a potential alternative arrangement, on a cost-sharing basis, for New York-based organizations.

51. The WBG has outsourced two types of reference checks to an external private firm: employment reference checks, which were previously conducted by the WBG executive resources through consultants; and security checks, which include identification and criminal records checking. The budget allocated to reference checks is the same as the previous amount spent on consultants. An individual case costs the WBG from US$ 1,000 up to US$ 10,000, depending on the level of the position for which the candidate is considered. The security check takes place in parallel with the employment reference check and may take from four to six weeks.

52. During the interviews, it transpired that outsourcing reference checking to private companies is not considered to be the best solution for United Nations system organizations. HRM officials and staff representatives interviewed consider it a costly arrangement. They also expressed their belief that having an external private party conducting reference checks for the United Nations system organizations could put at risk the integrity, ownership and confidence of the whole recruitment process.

---

[12] Currently Accurate Background, Inc. (www.accuratebackground.com), which replaced EmployeeScreenIQ (www.employeescreen.com) in 2011.

III.   PROCESS, METHODOLOGY, TIMING AND OUTCOME

A. The reference checking process

Benchmark 3

Reference checks are mandatory for all external candidates hired to fixed-term positions of one year or more irrespective of the category, level and location of the position; they are thoroughly and systematically conducted and include a combination of different types of checks.

In order to achieve this:

(a)   Human resources officials verify and certify the candidates' identity (copy of identity card, passport, etc.);

(b)   Educational background checks are conducted in all instances: human resources officials verify and certify the candidates' years of studies and diplomas/degrees/certificates acquired directly with the accredited/recognized secondary and tertiary schools/academic institutions that awarded them;

(c)   Employment checks are conducted in all instances: human resources officials verify and certify the candidates' years of employment required for the position; employment checks of previous or current staff of United Nations system organizations include a review of letters of appointment, performance appraisals and disciplinary records; recruitment cases are documented with candidates' copies of employment contracts and certificates of service or discharge, as well as with acceptance/resignation letters for governmental officials and national civil servants;

(d)   Character or personal checks are conducted in all instances: human resources officials contact three individuals who are listed by the candidates as "referees" and are not related to them; the referees are scholars or practitioners familiar with the candidate's personality and qualifications;

(e)   Certification expenses (for example, mailing and certification fees) are undertaken by the applicants;

(f)   Human resources officials document recruitment cases for posts of security officers and other key sensitive functions (for example, oversight services staff or staff dealing with children and other vulnerable groups) with certificates of non-conviction or equivalent certificates relevant to their criminal record; the collaboration of Member States is sought for the expeditious issuance of such documents;

(g)   Guidelines on security checks required for security staff are drafted in close collaboration with the Department of Safety and Security and its counterparts in other organizations in consultation with legal services. Guidelines on additional security checks (for example financial certificates, bankruptcy certificates, etc.) required for other groups of staff are drafted in collaboration with the legal services;

(h)   Guidelines stipulate how past criminal convictions and sanctions declared by the candidates, as well as past disciplinary measures and sanctions imposed by a United Nations organization, should be assessed.

53. Most reference checking processes of United Nations system organizations entail employment and educational background checks for external candidates whose appointments will be for one year or longer. Seven organizations (UNICEF, UNOPS, ICAO, IAEA, IMO, ITU and WHO (except the WHO Regional Office for Africa)) assert that they conduct both employment and educational reference checks for all positions, categories and levels, at both headquarters and in the field, irrespective of occupational group or type and duration of contract.

Categories and levels of staff checked

54. The United Nations specified that it performs only a basic background screening of candidates who will be appointed at a senior position, i.e. as Deputy Secretary-General, Under-Secretary-General, and Assistant Secretary-General. The 2011 JIU report on transparency in the selection and appointment of senior managers in the United Nations Secretariat has already pointed out the lack of detailed reference checks for candidates recruited to senior positions and recommended that they should be undertaken by OHRM or its equivalent.[13] At UNDP, Assistant Secretaries-General do not undergo any formal reference checks, while at IFAD they do not undergo reference checks at all. FAO and UNFPA occasionally verify the diplomas of Assistant Secretaries-General only. At WBG, reference checks for managers and above are rarely performed.

55. The United Nations Secretariat and UNDP check all the candidates for posts up to D-2 level. However, during a recent review of D-2 recruitments, OHRM officials found that reference checks were not conducted for candidates coming from United Nations system organizations applying to the United Nations Secretariat, as it was taken for granted that they had already been done. WFP said that HRM checks the references of all candidates appointed at D-2 level positions as well as those candidates for D-1 level whose recruitment case is handled by HRM. At FAO, some hiring managers verify the diplomas of directors appointed at D-1 and D-2 level positions. For nominations to WBG senior executive positions, for which a full search is required, reference checks are part of the normal recruitment process. Only at UNIDO are HRM officials always involved in the selection and appointment of staff up to D-1 level, and they conduct reference checks up to this level.

56. None of the organizations provided concrete information regarding the background checking of national staff members – National Professional Officers – whose posts' educational requirements include a university degree. The United Nations DFS/FPD conducts partial reference checks of candidates for Field Service posts, limited to employment history only; educational qualifications are checked only in cases of candidates applying for level 6 or 7 posts.

57. The recent conversion of contracts in the United Nations forced DFS/FPD/RVU to undertake an exercise of retrospective reference checking for current DFS staff members. These staff members were recruited as external candidates without undergoing the formalities required for the new type of contract that replaced their old contract. Therefore, their employment and educational references had not been verified previously. The exercise, which is still ongoing, had created a huge backlog, but the situation has improved. Similarly, due to the conversion of contracts and changes in post categories (from L to P), UNECA has also conducted retrospective reference checks on current staff, even for staff members who have been serving UNECA for 15 years or more.

Short-term staff, temporary staff and non-staff

---

[13] JIU/REP/2011/2, paras. 67 and 87 (e).

58. Although the present review focused on the reference checking in staff recruitment concerning appointments of one year and above, the Inspectors were also informed about how reference checks are conducted before hiring short-term staff, temporary staff and non-staff. The Inspectors found that at most organizations reference checks for members of the workforce whose contract is less than one year is limited to requesting copies of academic credentials for the file. Furthermore, reference checks for temporary appointments are simplified (for example at the United Nations) or partial (for example at UNHCR) at all organizations except UNDP and UN-Women, where the full reference check is conducted. The main argument put forward by organizations for not expanding regular reference checking to more types of staff and non-staff categories is the lack of resources. Moreover, a JIU review of individual consultancy in the United Nations system found that the use of non-staff across the United Nations system is on the rise and that such personnel represent a significant part of the total workforce.[14] The report suggested that reference checking for non-staff should be established and/or reinforced as well.[15]

Reference checks and appointment

59. ILO, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), UPU and WIPO do not consider the completion of reference checks as a prerequisite for appointing the selected candidate. ILO and WIPO do not conduct systematic reference checks. Nevertheless, WIPO explained that it is more meticulous in checking references of candidates applying for senior and other sensitive posts. ILO considers that the risk of not performing reference checks is mitigated by having in place a selection system able to detect whether a person is up to the level of the job, coupled with a performance management system foreseeing a probation period of one year only with a review after the first six months of service that determines the future of the employee.

Educational background checks

60. All United Nations system organizations request external candidates to present their original educational degrees/certificates (or their certified copies) either before or on appointment. UNHCR, UN-Women, UNESCO and WMO require copies of the degrees of all the short-listed candidates before their interviews. The ITU e-Recruitment system allows candidates to upload copies of degrees as attachments to the online curriculum vitae at the application stage. The United Nations, UNHCR and WFP seek further certification with regard to the final selected candidate's years of studies and the degrees awarded, as well the accreditation of the relevant academic institutions, by directly contacting the institutions and requesting them to respond in writing. The United Nations departments and offices reviewed have the same approach, with the exception of UNECA, which follows that practice only in case of doubt about a candidate's academic credentials. Similarly, UNDP, UN-Women, UNIDO and WIPO may contact the academic institutions in case of doubt regarding information provided by the candidate. UNOG reimburses candidates for the costs of certification, but at other organizations candidates bear those costs.

61. The United Nations, UNDP, UN-Women, WFP, FAO and ITU obtain the contact details for accredited/recognized academic institutions from the joint World Higher Education Database (WHED) of the International Association of Universities (IAU)/UNESCO Information Centre on Higher Education,[16] while UNHCR uses the same Centre's alternate publication, the *International*

---

[14] JIU/REP/2012/5, para. 16. The non-staff category reportedly constitutes 45 per cent of the workforce, on average.

[15] JIU/REP/2012/5, paras. 70 and 129.

[16] WHED is available on CD-ROM (www.iau-aiu.net/content/reference-publications) and online for its subscribers (www.whed-online.com). It lists more than 17,000 institutions, in 184 countries, that award

Handbook of Universities. The sources are not currently free of charge, but the Centre aims to post and make WHED accessible online for free from 2014 onwards. These sources primarily serve as tools for searches regarding educational qualifications during the "filtering" and pre-screening stages which precede the reference checking, to determine whether candidates have met the requirements of the post.

62. The United Nations OHRM and ILO utilize the UNESCO web portal to higher education[17] for this purpose, while IAEA uses a British Council/National Academic Recognition Information Centre publication issued in 1991. In conducting educational background verifications, most organizations, when necessary, may communicate directly with: permanent missions or Governments, including ministries of education and military schools; scientific, national institutions or peer networks; and/or other database sources (for example, links identifying diploma mills, and the National Student Clearing House). They may also rely on local databases built over time as well as Internet searches.

63. HRM officials whose organizations neither verify nor certify the candidates' degrees directly with the academic institutions admit that, despite all the precautions taken (for instance, examining the dry seal of the university on the original), eventually they have to take the degrees on face value because they lack the expertise and capability to recognize whether a diploma has been falsified.

64. The example of the three organizations (the United Nations, UNHCR and WFP) seeking direct certification of the candidates' degrees from the institutions which awarded them should be replicated in the United Nations system. The attachment by UNHCR and WFP of a copy of the candidate's diploma to the letter addressed to the academic institution requesting its certification is a good practice as well.

Employment background checks

65. Most organizations conduct checks of the candidates' employment history. The United Nations (except for UNOV/UNODC) and ICAO consider that they have completed the employment reference checking when they have collected facts and checked references covering the last 10 years of the candidate's employment history.[18] ITU and WMO check up to four references per candidate, including employers, covering the last five years of the candidate's employment history. At UNFPA, UNRWA, WFP, ICAO, WHO and WIPO, employment checks require contacting on average three former employers per candidate, irrespective of the period covered. Furthermore, UNICEF perceives as mandatory the checking of employment facts with current employers of the candidates; if the candidates do not consent to UNICEF contacting their current employers, then they are disqualified and cease to be considered for the post.

66. UNOV/UNODC, UN-Women, WFP, FAO, ICAO, ITU, WMO and UPU check the membership of candidates in professional boards, associations and networks only if it is required for the position and the profile of the candidate, and cited in the application. UNOV/UNODC,

---

four-year professional diplomas and/or post-graduate degrees. The list excludes institutions with a narrow curriculum and those that have been in existence for less than three years. Its information sources are national ministries of education or other competent authorities of a country.

[17] The UNESCO portal (www.unesco.org/new/en/education/resources/unesco-portal-to-recognized-higher-education-institutions) lists the higher education institutions of about 50 countries.

[18] ICAO specified that it covers a 10-year employment period only when it is possible and required for the post, namely for posts in the P-4 and above categories.

FAO, ICAO, ITU, UNIDO and WHO check candidates' publications where appropriate. Both practices are good and can be easily replicated by all organizations.

67. Several HRM officials suggested that United Nations common system performance appraisal records should be part of the standard reference checking across the system. Many agencies of the United Nations system use such forms, and they could be easily obtained from the human resources services or the candidate. Additionally, many private companies produce certificates for their employees upon separation, which may or may not include comments on their performance. The Inspectors find that obtaining these records will facilitate the verification of the employment history of candidates.

Other background checks

68. Other background checks conducted to a lesser extent are character and competency-based checks as well as criminal record checks.

69. The United Nations system organizations reviewed request applicants to mention three persons who are familiar with their character and qualifications. At four organizations (UNDP, UNHCR, ILO and UNESCO), the three names listed as the candidates' personal referees on their personal history form/curriculum vitae represent the only persons contacted. At most organizations one or two out of the three listed referees are always included among the persons contacted during the process. The United Nations OHRM has stopped performing personal checks, since they found that the reluctance of former employers/supervisors to respond to character-related questions was delaying the entire recruitment process. UNOG stated that it has stopped checking references with the three personal referees, given that, with Inspira, candidates are no longer required to fill out this part of their online application.

70. Conversely, at the time of the present review, UNOV/UNODC still considered reference checks concluded only upon receipt of responses from all three referees listed in candidates' personal history forms. However, they also suggested discontinuing such checks. Most HRM officials and staff representatives agree that personal referees submitted by candidates are not a reliable source since they are selected by the candidate because they would provide favourable comments. Some HRM officials, however, think that these referees are indicative of the candidate's networks. The Inspectors find that character or personal checks conducted either with academics or practitioners familiar with a candidate remain pertinent and help in assessing the candidate's suitability for an international civil servant post.

71. Only a few organizations (UNDP, WFP, IAEA, ICAO and ILO) ask competency-based questions during their employment background checks. The argument put forward by the United Nations Department of Management is that since the selection panels conduct competency-based interviews to evaluate candidates, there is no need for further verification of the candidates' competencies with their former employers. On the contrary, the Inspectors consider that competency-based questions combined with factual questions during the employment checks help to corroborate the assessment made of candidates during the interviews based on competencies demonstrated in their past career.

Security checks

72. Security checks are marginal or absent in most organizations or when done are limited to the criminal records of candidates for specific positions, such as Security Officers and drivers, at the United Nations DSS, UNOV/UNODC, FAO, ICAO, IMO, UNIDO, UPU and the WHO Regional Office for the Americas/Pan American Health Organization (AMRO/PAHO). WFP is the only

system organization that stated that it checks every candidate against the anti-terrorist list maintained by the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, although HRM officials observed that the list is not regularly updated and does not include pictures of the listed terrorists.[19] The anti-terrorist check is a simple check that could be replicated across the system.

73. Overall, the criminal record checks are not supported by any administrative instrument and are conducted in an inconsistent manner; different practices apply to the same type of services/function in the same geographical region, duty station, or even premises. For instance, within the United Nations Secretariat, UNON conducts criminal record checks for its Security Officers upon their entry in the safety and security services in Nairobi, while UNECA in Addis Ababa does not. At the Vienna International Centre compound, where UNOV/UNODC is co-located with a number of United Nations entities and IAEA, UNOV HRM conducts criminal checks on the Security Officers guarding the compound, while UNIDO HRM checks the criminal records of the candidates to be recruited by the Buildings Management Service who have access to the entire compound. IAEA HRM has expanded its criminal record checks to all candidates for posts in the General Service category. In Geneva, UNOG HRM conducts basic criminal record checks for candidates to Security Officer posts only once, upon their entry to the safety and security services. Notably, the criminal record checks conducted on security agents employed by the local security services provider,[20] which is contracted by ITU and WMO, are more thorough and must be renewed every four years in accordance with the police regulations of the host country, specifically, the Canton of Geneva.

74. UN-Women and UNOV/UNODC officials interviewed underlined the lack of relevant guidelines to assess the gravity of convictions and offences indicated by candidates in their personal history forms. At UNOV/UNODC, the current practice is that HRM goes back to the candidate for a detailed explanation of the indicated law violation and the Chief of HRM takes the responsibility for the decision to select the candidate in consultation with the hiring manager. At international level, the Inspectors have found that at the European Central Bank, an applicant's statement of having been convicted to imprisonment of one year or more over the last 20 years will trigger automatic rejection of his or her application, while other offences or records will be scrutinized if the candidate is selected and offered a contract.[21]

75. In interviews, internal oversight officials at several organizations stated having recommended that criminal record checks expand to other functions dealing with vulnerable groups (such as children) or confidential issues (such as oversight and procurement).

76. According to OHRM, the verification of criminal records is impossible, because there is no system in place to ask for a certificate of non-conviction. Moreover, OHRM sees diversity in the information as a major obstacle, as it varies from country to country. Recent research conducted by an independent international network [22] corroborates the OHRM concerns. The study concluded that the level of information disclosed, the disclosure security and the time frames, as well as the quality of the records, vary significantly from country to country, and in many countries local factors may undermine the veracity of the information.

---

[19] See www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/aq_sanctions_list.shtml.
[20] ARNDT Securité et Services Suisse SA (www.arndt-gruppe.ch).
[21] See www.ecb.europa.eu/ecb/jobs/newcomers/html/index.en.html.
[22] KPMG LLP, Disclosure of Criminal Records in Overseas Jurisdictions, March 2009.

77. Nevertheless, the Inspectors are of the opinion that it is important to systematically conduct criminal checks for all positions of security officers and key sensitive functions. **The Inspectors invite the Member States to consider facilitating criminal records checks as appropriate**.

78. UNHCR, with the collaboration of its legal services, checks whether its former affiliate workforce and non-staff applying as external candidates have a disciplinary record with UNHCR or a disciplinary case pending before the United Nations administrative tribunals. No other organization mentioned a similar check, except UNICEF, which checks disciplinary records of former staff when they re-apply and are recommended for a post with the organization. **The Inspectors encourage the HRM of each organization to check the disciplinary records of their former staff as well as non-staff who are applying as external candidates; and, moreover, to share in confidentiality the results of disciplinary record checks regarding past and current staff members applying for posts with other United Nations system organizations, during the reference checking process**.

B. Methodology

Benchmark 4

Reference checks are conducted in writing using templates and various means of communication as appropriate.

This entails that:

(a)   Human resources services design and use throughout the organization templates with standard content for each type of reference check; and

(b)   Guidelines specify which means of communication are used for the references verification (for example courier, registered mail, e-mail, fax), namely for sending out the templates to be completed and receiving the completed templates and pertinent documentation.

79. Presently, checks across the system are conducted either in writing or orally (including by telephone).

80. Fifteen organizations communicate with referees, including employers and academic institutions, to conduct personal/character, educational and employment checks mainly in writing, using e-mail, fax and regular mail, except UNOV/UNODC, which may also use telephone communication. UNDP conducts employment checks mainly in writing, but it may occasionally conduct them orally. UNFPA, UNOPS, FAO and UPU stated that they use telephone communication for their checks. UNDP, UNFPA and UN-Women document the telephone conversations for auditing purposes. The main argument put forward by UNDP and UNFPA for using verbal communication is that former employers are reluctant to fill out forms, especially if their comments are negative; in addition, a dialogue with an employer helps the recruiters to clarify additional points. **The Inspectors agree that as long as organizations continue the practice of checks conducted orally, they should record these oral checks in written, dated and signed records.**

81. Most organizations use templates for employment checking, but only two have designed templates for educational checks (United Nations Secretariat and UNHCR); only UNHCR and WIPO use a separate form for personal references. Some staff representatives believe that people who provide a reference should be free to give examples of what the applicants were doing at their previous jobs; they find most organizations' templates inappropriate in that regard. **The**

Inspectors believe that the use of detailed templates that are filled out and signed by the respondents constitutes a good practice.

82. For reference checks, IMO uses SurveyMonkey, a free web-based online survey tool based on a behaviourally anchored rating scale principle. The organization sends e-mails with a link to the persons from whom it is seeking information, without any other formality. Such approach presents some disadvantages, in the opinion of the Inspectors, as the survey tool is not justified for the limited number of persons to be contacted per candidate.

83. Many organizations involve the candidates in the process, with respect to providing updated contact details for or liaising with referees and academic institutes, or even correcting minor errors. FAO and IMO, however, do not involve the candidates at all. The Inspectors were informed that some organizations exchange correspondence via e-mail with referees and other respondents to reference checks. When checking references for whom the candidate has listed an e-mail address from a free public provider (for example Yahoo, Google and Hotmail), recruiters, including HRM officials, do not first verify the identity of the e-mail address holder. Similarly, telephone numbers provided are called without HRM officials and hiring managers having previously double-checked whether they are registered in the name of the person or entity that they trying to reach. This practice should be discontinued, given the risk of candidates misrepresenting references using false contact details, as revealed in some internal investigations.

C. Timing

Benchmark 5

Reference checks are conducted in a timely manner from the recommendation stage of the selection process for short-listed and interviewed candidates.

This requires that:

(a) The selection decision is based on checked facts concerning the candidates' qualifications and background that best suit the requirements of the post; and

(b) Reference checks are completed within one month following the decision on the recommendation of interviewed candidates.

Reference checks in the selection timeline

84. Given the large numbers of applicants, recruiters cannot afford to conduct reference checks at the beginning of the selection and recruitment process. Subsequently, reference checking may take place after the first pre-screening, when the pool of applicants is narrowed to a short list of qualified candidates invited for an interview. Even so, organizations may not have the capacity to undertake checks for all short-listed candidates. Alternatively, organizations could check the references of all candidates recommended for selection; they do not have to wait until the selection decision and check only the selected candidate. Checking references of at least three recommended candidates found well qualified for the post mitigates the risk of delays and helps anticipate problems.

85. UNFPA, UNRWA, WMO and some regional offices of WHO perform reference checks for the short-listed candidates before their interviews, while UNHCR, UN-Women, UNESCO and UNIDO conduct a preliminary verification of educational credentials before or on the day of the short-listed candidates' interviews. UNOV/UNODC, some UNICEF regional offices, UNOPS, FAO, IAEA, ICAO and UNESCO perform reference checks for all recommended candidates,

while UNDP limits such checks to the recommended candidates whose names are put forward to the compliance review board. The remaining organizations check the references of the selected candidate only.

86. At the United Nations, reference checks are conducted once the selected candidate responds positively to the offer of appointment. However, the new draft guidelines, as of October 2012, put the reference checks at an earlier step of the recruitment process for all recommended candidates. In this way the selection decision is based also on the result of the checks.

87. Reference checking performed at the end of the recruitment process and only for the final selected candidate affects the overall speed of recruitment, for instance if the selected candidate turns down the offer of appointment or is disqualified as a candidate due to failures in reference checking. Expanding references checks to all recommended candidates enables the anticipation of delays created by the withdrawal or disqualification of the only checked selected candidate.

Duration of reference checks

88. The reference checking process at United Nations system organizations might take from two days only (at UNOPS for all checks) to three months or more (at the United Nations and UNHCR). At UNOV/UNODC, the duration of the process may be as short as five days, yet it may take up to 90 days. The United Nations and its departments (Department of Management, DFS and DSS), UNON and UNHCR stated that their processes take 90 days as well. Most organizations complete the process within a period of 7 to 21 days. UNICEF, ILO, UPU, ITU, UNWTO and IAEA were unable to provide statistical data on the duration of their processes. (See annex I.)

89. The Inspectors noted that no organization has set specific targets for conducting reference checks, even though these are crucial both to provide incentive for their timely completion and to monitor progress.

90. Both the 2011 JIU report on transparency in the selection and appointment of senior management[23] and the 2010 Office of Internal Oversight Services audit on the recruitment process for senior management level positions in the United Nations Secretariat[24] found reference checks to be one of the factors slowing down the selection process for filling senior posts. In early 2009, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to review the reference checking procedure.[25] In September 2010, the Secretary-General reported to the General Assembly that reference checking procedures had been examined in detail and process improvements had been identified with a view to incorporating the functionality into Inspira.[26] At the time of writing, the reference checks functionality had not yet been incorporated into Inspira.

91. **The Inspectors, bearing in mind the need to safeguard the organizations' integrity, credibility and reputation, are of the view that in no instance should the recruitment process be hastened at the expense of the reference checking procedure**.

---

[23] JIU/REP/2011/2.

[24] AH2010/512/01, para. 15.

[25] General Assembly resolution 63/250.

[26] See A/65/305, annex.

D. Outcome

Benchmark 6

The completion of reference checks is duly documented, reviewed and certified prior to concluding the recruitment process.

This requires that:

(a) Review, selection and appointment panels receive, review and take into consideration the results of reference checks;

(b) Guidelines stipulate how past criminal convictions and sanctions declared by the candidates as well as past disciplinary measures and sanctions imposed by a United Nations organization are assessed;

(c) Guidelines determine how discrepancies and negative outcome are assessed and who makes the assessment regarding the retention or disqualification of candidates;

(d) Human resources officials certify that all due reference checks have been completed;

(e) Human resources officials receive and safeguard candidates' officially certified and authenticated copies of their diplomas and/or other educational documents, including language certificates, accompanied by official translations in one of the organizations' working languages, if necessary;

(f) The outcome of the checks is duly stored both in the recruitment and personnel files of the selected candidate; they are recorded and captured by e-recruitment or other systems in place (rosters/pools) for future use; and

(g) The results of checks are safeguarded for at least five years in electronic databases.

Completion of reference checks

92. The completion of satisfactory background checks constitutes a condition for appointment for most organizations; therefore, most organizations include a relevant clause in their offers of appointment. However, the United Nations DFS, UNON, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UN-Habitat, UNICEF, FAO, ILO, IMO and UNIDO admit that this condition is not strictly enforced: there are cases in which they bring the selected candidates on board even though the condition of completed backgrounds checks has not been fulfilled. The necessity of surge recruitment is the main argument for not complying with the condition. To counterbalance the risk of unsatisfactory results of checks following the appointment, these offices/organizations repeat the same condition in the letters of appointments signed by the newly recruited staff members pending the completion of their reference checks.

93. UNOV/UNODC is the only entity in the system in which the head of recruitment certifies with his signature on a special checklist form the date of completion of the reference checking process. A copy of the signed form is placed in the new recruit's personnel file. This is a good practice that should be replicated, wherever feasible.

94. The United Nations DFS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WHO show flexibility in cases of a negative outcome or minor errors in the checks: they request additional references and referees' names from the candidates. The United Nations OHRM and UNOV/UNODC may hire a candidate whose personal history form contains information that presents discrepancies with the

information collected during the checks, if the hiring managers decide that the "negative findings" do not influence the qualifications required for the post and the head of the department does not object to this decision.

95. At most organizations, reference check documentation is kept in the recruitment files, separate from the official status file of the staff member for confidentiality purposes. At WHO, the reference checks are kept in both the recruitment and personnel files of the recruited staff member. A recent audit of the official status files kept for Security Officers by UNOG indicated that their criminal record checks lacked clear documentation.[27] IAEA and UNIDO keep the completed reference checks that they performed for recommended candidates who have not been selected for a post in a separate database, so that the reference checks made for well-qualified candidates are safeguarded for future use. No organization has mentioned any guideline on how long the organization must safeguard the reference check results in storage.

96. Safeguarding in existing rosters the results of the completed reference checks of recommended candidates for future recruitment cases prevents duplication of efforts and resources. Organizations will not have to repeat the reference checking process for recommended external candidates who reapply and get recommended/selected for another post within the same organization.

97. The United Nations Department of Management and DFS indicated the need for a common, shared database for storing background verification records, which would encompass all the data stored in locally created individual databases of the United Nations and be accessible to all human resources practitioners of the United Nations Secretariat. OHRM stated that it is in the process of building such a database. The United Nations DFS/FDP/RVU uses a database on the Nucleus system for storing its background verification results. However, this shared database has not been proven secure enough to prevent compromised data entries in the past. The Operational Management Team of UNCT in Addis Ababa, whose human resources cluster's working group has started reflecting on recruitment issues, envisages establishing a common service and database for UNCT in the future.

98. The implementation of the following recommendation will disseminate good practices across the United Nations system and contribute to enhanced effectiveness and efficiency:

Recommendation 1

Executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should adopt the benchmarks set out in the present note with a view to ensuring that their respective organizations have sound reference checking procedures, and report progress made to the legislative/governing bodies.

---

[27] AE2011/311/05, para. 16.

IV. UNITED NATIONS REFORM AND HARMONIZATION OF BUSINESS PRACTICES

99. Both officials and staff representatives suggest that the most significant enhancement of the reference checking process would be its standardization. The Human Resources Network of the CEB High-level Committee on Management (HLCM) is actively involved in some recruitment harmonization initiatives in the context of the "Delivering as one" concept, such as a pilot project to harmonize vacancy advertisement and selection, including reference checks, at country level for some categories of staff. **The Inspectors found this initiative to be an encouraging step towards greater harmonization efforts in the future**.

100.   The Inspectors commend the harmonization initiatives in recruitment that are taking place at country level and urge the organizations to continue to collaborate through CEB/HLCM and extend their efforts in this regard to include reference checks.

101.   The Inspectors invite CEB/HLCM, in consultation with the Inter-Agency Security Management Network, to undertake further initiatives, including expanding types of reference checks, namely introducing and/or standardizing checks of criminal records, in particular for safety and security staff across the system.

102.   The implementation of the following recommendation is expected to enhance cooperation and coordination and strengthen coherence and harmonization among system-wide organizations:

Recommendation 2

The CEB, through the HLCM, taking into account the benchmarks set out in the present note, should facilitate the standardization and harmonization of reference checking procedures across the system with a view to further support inter-agency mobility and the One United Nations goal.

Annex I
Reference checking in the staff recruitment process in United Nations system organizations

Organization	Administrative issuances mentioning reference checking & specialized issuances	Is the completion of reference checking: (a) A recruitment condition? (b) Always fulfilled? (c) Conducted systematically?	Who is checked?	Average process duration (calendar days)	Background checking standard coverage	Background checking specific to the organization
United Nations and funds, programmes and offices						
United Nations	- OHRM, 2012: Instructional Manual for the Recruiter on the Staff Selection System (Inspira)[1] - Checklist & Templates - DSS, 2008: United Nations Security Officers Recruitment and Selection Process (approved by OHRM) *(ST/AI/2010/3 on staff recruitment system makes no mention on reference checking)[1]* - DPKO, 2008: Standard Operating Procedure : Recruitment of candidate for UN peacekeeping operations[2]	(a) Yes (b) Yes, with some exceptions in surge recruitment by DFS or cases handled by Offices Away from Headquarters (c) Yes, except employment checks for Field Service staff by DFS	Selected candidate	DM/OHRM: 60 days DFS HQ: 90 days DFS/FPD/ RVU[3]: 16 days DSS: *No statistics available*	- 10 years of employment history (DFS/FPD/ RVU is satisfied with a 75% coverage of the decade) - Copies of degrees and certificates - Academic credentials certification by accredited institution (UNECA[4] checks only in case of doubt; while DFS/FPD/RVU does not check Field Service staff below level 6 and 7)	OHRM: Plagiarism DSS: Police certificates for armed Security Officers UNOG[5], UNON & UNOV: Criminal records of Security Officers
UNCTAD	*Same as United Nations OHRM*	(a) Yes (b) Yes, with some exceptions (c) Yes *(by UNOG)*	Selected candidate	UNOG: *No statistics available*	- Copies of degrees and certificates - Academic credentials certification by accredited institution[4]	–
UNDP	- Recruitment and Selection Framework, 2009 - Minimum Academic and Relevant Working Experience Requirements for Recruiting Staff in UNDP, 2011	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	Up to 4 recommended candidates	*No statistics available*	- 3 referees of PH form - 3 last appraisal forms* - Copies of degrees and certificates; - In case of doubt, academic credentials certification by	–

Organization	Administrative issuances mentioning reference checking & specialized issuances	Is the completion of reference checking: (a) A recruitment condition? (b) Always fulfilled? (c) Conducted systematically?	Who is checked?	Average process duration (calendar days)	Background checking standard coverage	Background checking specific to the organization
					accredited institution[4]	
UNEP	*Same as United Nations OHRM*	(a) Yes (b) Yes, with some exceptions (c) Yes *(by UNON)*	Selected candidate	UNON: 90 days	- Copies of degrees and certificates - Academic credentials certification by accredited institution	UNON: Criminal records of Security Officers
UNFPA	HR Policies and Procedures Manual, *not dated*	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	Selected candidate	*No statistics available*	- 3 former employers - 2 last appraisal forms* - Copies of degrees and certificates	_
UN-Habitat	*Same as United Nations OHRM*	(a) Yes (b) Yes, with some exceptions (c) Yes *(by UNON)*	Selected candidate	UNON: 90 days	- Copies of degrees and certificates - Academic credentials certification by accredited institution[4]	UNON: Criminal records of Security Officers
UNHCR	Staff Administrative and Management Manual, 2012	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	Selected candidate	60 - 90 days	- 3 referees of PH form - Copies of degrees and certificates - Academic credentials certification by accredited institution[6]	Disciplinary records check for former UNHCR affiliate staff and non-staff
UNICEF	- Staff Selection Policy, 2009 *(under revision)* - Recruitment and staffing in emergency situations, 2010 -**CF/AI/2008-014 on presentation of academic degrees** - **RSS Reference Checks Best Practices** (2011 internal document)	(a) Yes (b) Yes, with some exceptions in surge recruitment (c) Yes	Recommended Candidate(s)	*No statistics available*	- 3 former employers, incl. the current one (mandatory) - 2 last appraisal forms* - Copies of degrees and certificates	_
UNODC	*same as United Nations OHRM*	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes *(by UNOV)*	More than 3 recommended candidates	UNOV: 5 - 90 days	- 3 referees of PH form - Copies of degrees and certificates - Academic credentials certification by accredited institution[4]	UNOV: - Criminal records of Security Officers at the VIC; - Professional memberships & publications, where appropriate

Organization	Administrative issuances mentioning reference checking & specialized issuances	Is the completion of reference checking: (a) A recruitment condition? (b) Always fulfilled? (c) Conducted systematically?	Who is checked?	Average process duration (calendar days)	Background checking standard coverage	Background checking specific to the organization
UNOPS	- Recruitment Policy, 2009	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	All recommended candidates	2 days	- 2 last appraisal forms* - Copies of degrees and certificates	Professional memberships & publications, where appropriate
UNRWA	International Staff Selection Policy, 2011	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	All short-listed candidates	14 days	- 3 former employers - 2 last appraisal forms* - Copies of degrees and certificates	_
UN-Women	(*in process*: while in transition applying ex-UNIFEM and UNDP issuances)	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	Selected candidate	7 - 14 days	- 3 referees of PH form - Copies of degrees and certificates - In case of doubt, academic credentials certification by accredited institution[4]	Professional memberships, where appropriate
WFP	- Recruitment and Selection Framework for Locally-recruited Staff, 2010 - Recruitment and Selection of Staff Members in the International Professional and Higher categories, 2011	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	Selected candidate	14 days	- 3 former employers - Copies of degrees and certificates	- Security Council resolutions 1267 and 1989 anti-terrorism list checks - Professional memberships
Specialized agencies and IAEA						
FAO	(*FAO Guidelines on the Recruitment process make no mention on reference checking*)	(a) Yes (b) Yes, but not consistently (c) Yes	More than 3 recommended candidates	7 days	- Copies of degrees and certificates	Professional memberships & publications, where appropriate
IAEA	Administrative Manual: Personnel Administration and Staff Welfare[7]	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	More than 3 recommended candidates	*No statistics available*	- Copies of degrees and certificates	Criminal records of all General Service staff at VIC and Seibersdorf lab as well as the Monaco-based lab premises
ICAO	(*In process of developing*)	(a) Yes (b) Yes, with exceptions (c) Yes	More than 3 recommended candidates	5 - 10 days	- 10 years of employment history (where possible, for P-4 and above posts) -3 referees - Copies of degrees and certificates	- Criminal records for certain positions - Professional memberships & publications, where appropriate

Organization	Administrative issuances mentioning reference checking & specialized issuances	Is the completion of reference checking: (a) A recruitment condition? (b) Always fulfilled? (c) Conducted systematically?	Who is checked?	Average process duration (calendar days)	Background checking standard coverage	Background checking specific to the organization
ILO	Recruitment of non-local staff on FCT technical cooperation	(a) No, except for project staff (b) N/A (Yes, for project staff) (c) No, except for project staff	Selected candidate	*No statistics available*	- 3 referees of CV form - Copies of degrees and certificates	–
IMO	*(Not available)*	(a) Yes (b) Yes, but not strictly applied (c) Yes, only for educational references	Selected candidate	21 days	- Copies of degrees and certificates	–
ITU	*(Not available)*	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	Selected candidate	*No statistics available*	- 5 years of employment history -Up to 4 referees incl. former employers - Copies of degrees and certificates	Professional memberships & publications, where appropriate
UNESCO	- HR Manual: Recruitment for International Posts and above, National Professionals Officers 2009 - HR Manual-Appendix 5 D: **GUIDELINES How to take reference checks** (2009, 2 pp.) - HR Manual-Appendix 5 G: **CHECKLIST Recruitment Process (P1-5)** (2009, 1p.)	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	More than 3 recommended candidates	7 days	- 2 of 3 referees of PH form - Copies of degrees and certificates	–
UNIDO	- HRM Framework - **Reference checks guidelines** (2012, 1-page internal document)	(a) Yes (b) Yes, with exceptions in surge recruitment for projects (c) Yes	Selected candidate	14 - 21 days	- 5 years of employment history (and at least 3 former employers) - 3 personal referees - Copies of degrees and certificates - In case of doubt, academic credentials certification by accredited institution[4]	- Criminal records for all Building Management Section (BMS) staff at the VIC - Publications, where appropriate
WMO	WMO Standing Instructions, Chapter 4, Appendix 4.D & E: Framework for Recruitment	(a) Yes (as of November 2012) (b) Yes (as of November 2012) (c) Yes (as of November 2012)	More than 3 short-listed candidates	7 - 10 days	-Up to 4 referees incl. former employers - copies of degrees and	Professional memberships, where appropriate

Organization	Administrative issuances mentioning reference checking & specialized issuances	Is the completion of reference checking: (a) A recruitment condition? (b) Always fulfilled? (c) Conducted systematically?	Who is checked?	Average process duration (calendar days)	Background checking standard coverage	Background checking specific to the organization
	and Selection, November 2012				certificates	
UPU	*(In process)*	(a) No (b) No (c) No	*(If performed: recommended candidates)*	*No statistics available*	(Not known)	- Criminal records for certain positions - Professional memberships, where appropriate
UNWTO	*(Not available)*	(a) No (b) N/A (c) No	*(Not available)*	*Idem*	*Idem*	*Idem*
WHO	- EURO Guidelines to Advisory Selection Committees - AMRO/PAHO Manual	(a) Yes (b) Yes (c) Yes	EURO: More than 3 short-listed candidates AMRO: 1 selected candidate	10 days	- 3 former employers - 2 last appraisal forms* - Copies of degrees and certificates	- Criminal records in AMRO - Publications - Professional memberships for senior positions in AFRO, AMRO, EURO
WIPO	Staff Rules and Regulations - Annex III: Selection Procedures for temporary appointments, 2012	(a) No (b) Yes (as a result of new practice established) (c) No, ad hoc: stricter with senior and oversight function candidates	Selected candidate	7 - 14 days	- 3 former employers - Copies of degrees and certificates - In case of doubt, academic credentials certification by accredited institution[4]	Publications, where appropriate

[1] Reportedly, in process: (a) OHRM Draft "Guidelines on Verification of Educational Qualification and Employment Experience" (dated 7 June 2012, 32 pp.), prepared in consultation with DFS; (b) OHRM draft Administrative Instruction (AI) on the recruitment of security staff (issuance target date: first quarter to 2013).

[2] DFS/FPD Draft "SOP: Staff Section System for Peacekeeping Operations and Special Political Missions", dated February 2012.

[3] RVU: a DFS pilot project dedicated to reference checking since 2008; it appears in the Brindisi- based UNGSC Organigram (its staff members are incumbents of temporary posts funded by its budget) with a dual reporting line to both DFS and UNGSC.

[4] The organization is subscribed with the IAU/UNESCO WHED which lists most accredited/recognized higher education institutions of the world and their contact details.

[5] Not clearly and consistently documented checks.

[6] UNHCR uses the IAU/UNESCO Handbook, an alternate publication of WHED.

[7] IAEA AM II/3 text mentions reference checking as requirement only for short and temporary appointments. * Only for former and current staff of the United Nations common system applying as external candidates

Source: JIU (responses to questionnaire, interview notes and internal oversight reports)

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

JIU/NOTE/2013/1

Report		Intended impact	CEB	United Nations*	UNCTAD	ITC	UNDP	UNEP	UNFPA	UN-Habitat	UNHCR	UNICEF	UNODC	UNOPS	UNRWA	UN-Women	WFP	FAO	IAEA	ICAO	ILO	IMO	ITU	UNAIDS	UNESCO	UNIDO	UNWTO	UPU	WHO	WIPO	WMO
			United Nations, its funds and programmes															**Specialized agencies and IAEA**													
	For action		⊠	⊠	⊠	☐	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠
	For information		☐	☐	☐	⊠	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Recommendation 1		b e g	▨	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	E
Recommendation 2		c	E	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨

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.

* Covers all entities listed in ST/SGB/2002/11 other than UNCTAD, UNODC, UNEP, UN-Habitat, UNHCR, UNRWA.