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Human resources management

Activities of the Ethics Office

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [60/254](#), entitled “Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations”, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report annually on the activities of the Ethics Office and the implementation of ethics policies. The report also includes information on the activities of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, as requested by the Assembly in its resolution [63/250](#) on human resources management. It includes information regarding the proposals for strengthening the independence of the Office, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution [71/263](#).

The present report covers the period from 1 January to 31 December 2020.

* [A/76/50](#).



I. Introduction

1. The present report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Ethics Office is submitted in accordance with paragraph 16 (i) of General Assembly resolution [60/254](#). The 15 years since the Ethics Office began its operations as the first ethics office in the common system have witnessed a steady increase in requests for its services. The increase, which has been continuous, except in 2020, in the context of a gradually shrinking Secretariat workforce, could be due to growing awareness of the work of the Office. In addition to the volume of service requests handled, the Office has focused, over the years, on the quality of its services, which are intended to accommodate the individual needs of staff and the specific circumstances of various duty stations.

2. In the report, the Secretary-General presents the activities of the Ethics Office in 2020. In relation to the proposals made in his previous reports ([A/73/89](#), [A/74/78](#) and [A/75/82](#)) to strengthen the independence of the Office, he addresses the workload, structure and functions of the Office and the implications of such strengthening for other offices in the Secretariat, and for the United Nations funds and programmes.

II. Background

3. The objective of the Ethics Office is to assist the Secretary-General in ensuring that staff members observe and perform their functions in a manner consistent with the highest standards of integrity, as required in the Charter of the United Nations, by fostering a culture of ethics, transparency and accountability. The Office was established by the Secretary-General as an independent unit of the Secretariat, pursuant to paragraph 161 (d) of General Assembly resolution [60/1](#).

4. Pursuant to Secretary-General's bulletins [ST/SGB/2005/22](#), [ST/SGB/2007/11](#) and [ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1](#), the functions of the Ethics Office include:

(a) Providing confidential advice and guidance to staff on ethical issues, including administering an ethics helpline;

(b) Administering the Organization's financial disclosure programme;

(c) Administering the Organization's policy on protection against retaliation for the responsibilities assigned to the Ethics Office;

(d) Developing standards, training and education on ethics issues, in coordination with the Office of Human Resources and other offices as appropriate, and conducting ethics-related outreach; and

(e) Supporting ethics standard-setting and promoting policy coherence within the Secretariat and among the Organization's separately administered organs and programmes.

III. General information

5. With regular budget resources of \$2.088 million¹ for 2020, and 12 posts financed through various accounts,² the Ethics Office covered 36,574 staff of the global Secretariat as at 31 December 2019 (see [A/75/591](#)), a decrease from 37,505 as at

¹ Information from the programme budget for 2020 ([A/74/6/Add.1](#)). The amount excludes resources from the support account for peacekeeping operations and cost recovery for the financial disclosure programme from other United Nations agencies.

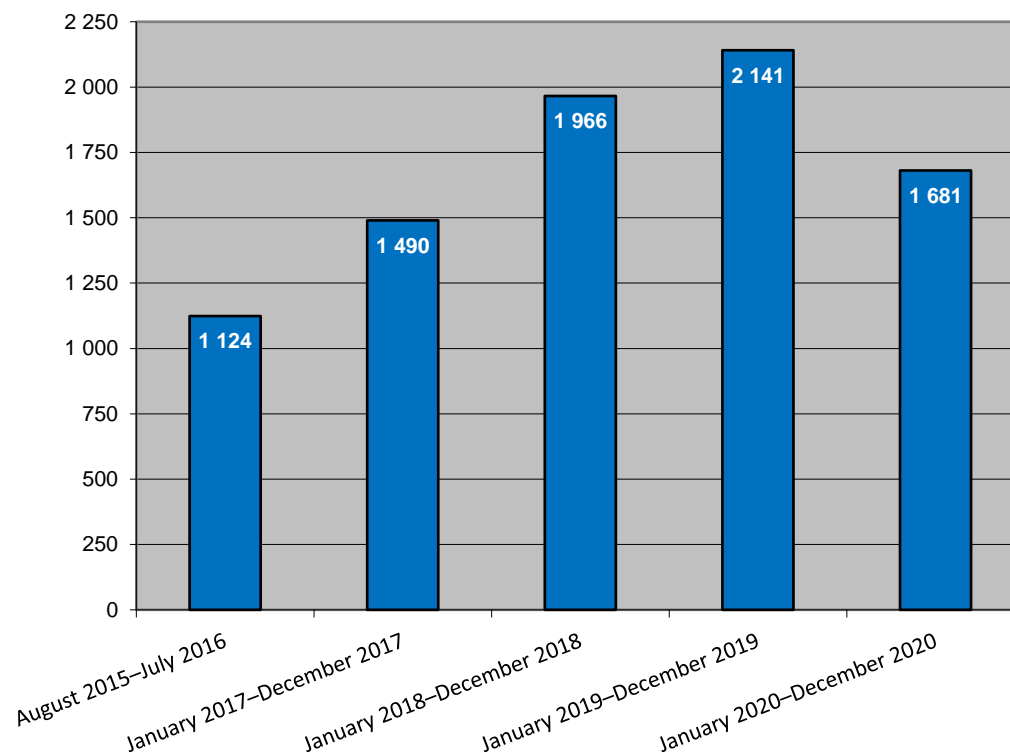
² The proposed programme budget for 2020 ([A/74/6 \(Sect. 1\)](#), table 1.30), and the budget for the support account for peacekeeping operations for the period from 1 July 2019 to 30 June 2020 ([A/73/793](#)).

31 December 2018. The Office also covered United Nations entities that did not yet have their own ethics officers, such as the International Trade Centre, the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, the International Civil Service Commission, the United Nations University, the International Court of Justice, and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). The total number of staff covered, therefore, was 38,675 (ibid.). In addition, around 17,000 non-staff personnel (see [JIU/REP/2014/8](#), annex II, and recent internal estimates), excluding uniformed personnel, are covered for the purpose of implementing the policy on protection against retaliation, bringing the estimated total number of personnel covered to around 55,000.

6. From 1 January to 31 December 2020, the Office received 1,681 requests for services. As shown in figure I, that number represents a significant decrease compared with the steady increase in the number of requests in the preceding years. (The decrease may be attributable to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, and the resulting alternative work arrangements and impact on the concerns of staff about their health and work-life balance. The pandemic may have reduced the number of requests related to standard issues such as outside activities, and gifts and honours.) Of the total, 866 requests were from women, 717 were from men, 36 were from groups and 62 were from undisclosed sources. More women than men sought ethics advice (385 women compared with 275 men), while more men than women made claims of protection against retaliation for reporting misconduct and cooperating with an audit or investigation (66 men compared with 63 women). The statistics should be understood in the context of the gender distribution in the Secretariat during the reporting period, given that, as at 31 December 2019, women represented 38.4 percent of Secretariat staff (see [A/75/591](#)).

Figure I

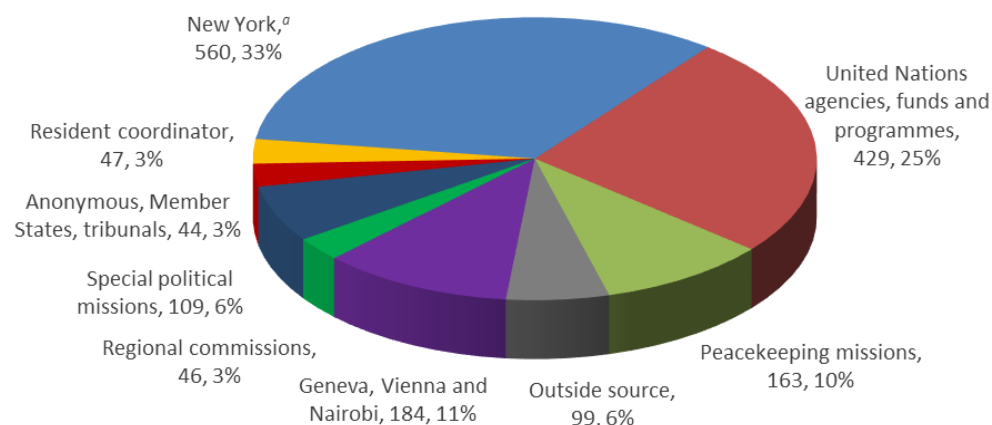
Overall requests for Ethics Office services over the past five reporting periods



7. The Ethics Office responded to the challenges faced by staff as a result of the pandemic by extending the submission deadline for the 2020 financial disclosure programme exercise by a month. The Office also replaced planned outreach travel with virtual activities, when possible, and sought to give presentations about its activities at larger virtual meetings. The Office remained available to provide advice and briefings remotely to various duty stations.

8. Although it is based in New York, the Ethics Office continued to receive many requests from other locations (see figure II). A third of the service requests were from New York and the rest were from offices away from Headquarters.

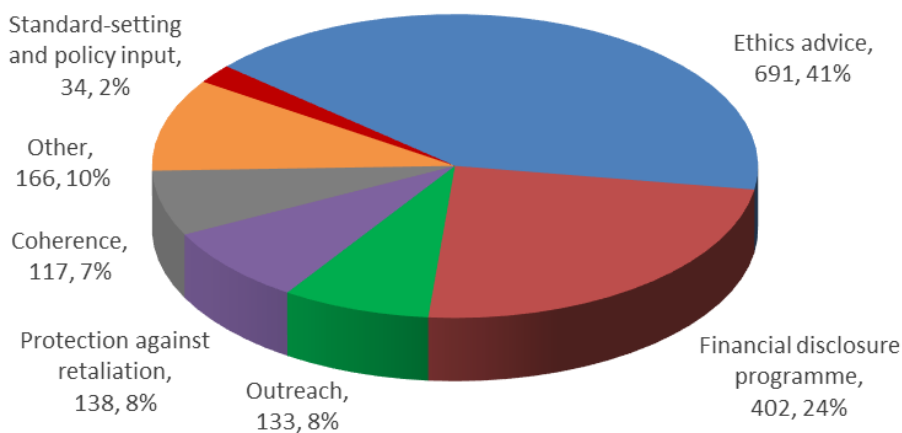
Figure II
Service requests in 2020, by source



^a United Nations Headquarters in New York includes staff of entities that are based in New York and staff members of these entities who are based at other duty stations.

9. Figure III shows that, of the total of 1,681 requests, the largest portion (691) in 2020 was for ethics advice, a decrease from 934 in 2019. Of the 691 requests for ethics advice, 385 were made by women, 275 were made by men, 11 were made by groups and 20 were made by undisclosed requesters. The number of requests related to protection against retaliation also decreased, from 204 in 2019 to 138 in 2020. There were 402 requests related to the financial disclosure programme, 117 related to coherence, 34 related to standard-setting and 166 categorized as “other.” In addition, 133 outreach sessions were held.

Figure III
Service requests in 2020, by category



IV. Activities of the Ethics Office

A. Advice and guidance

10. The provision of ethics advice is a fundamental component of the Ethics Office's mandate to foster a culture of ethics, transparency and accountability. By providing clear, consistent, and actionable advice – based largely on Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2016/9](#) – the Office enables staff to manage potential conflicts of interest and resolve ethical dilemmas before they become problems. In addition to advising on matters relating to individual integrity, such as outside activities and affiliations, the Office advises staff and management on ethical concerns relating to institutional integrity matters. They involve operational procedures and management in high-integrity risk areas such as procurement and vendor management, and engagement with external parties in relation to donations and external partnerships. By advising on appropriate courses of action guided by the core values and standards of the Organization, the Office assists in ensuring that conflicts of interest and reputational risks are identified and mitigated.

11. The number of requests for ethics advice decreased from 934 in 2019 to 691 in 2020, representing a 26 per cent decrease, most likely owing to restrictions brought about by COVID-19. While the number of requests decreased in every ethics advice subcategory except institutional integrity, the areas with the largest decreases were employment, gifts and honours, and pre-appointment vetting. Figure IV shows the subcategories of requests for ethics advice in 2020, while Figure V provides a breakdown of the different categories of advice requested in the last three years.

Figure IV
Requests for ethics advice in 2020, by subcategory

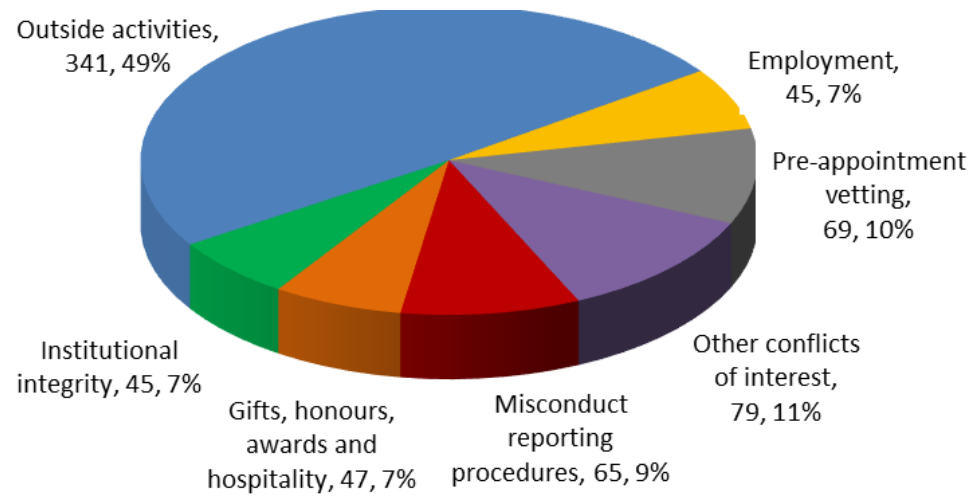
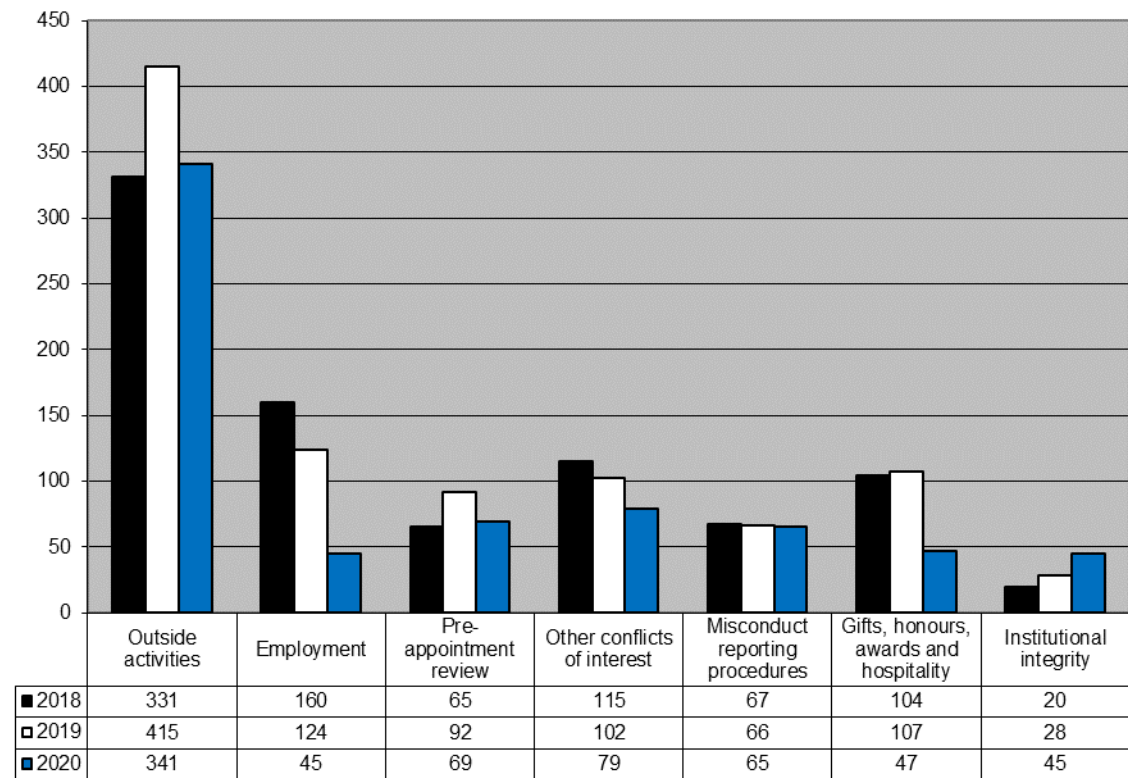


Figure V
Requests for ethics advice in the past three years, by subcategory



1. Employment

12. Employment-related queries include those regarding guidance on the Organization’s standards of conduct about interpersonal and supervisory relations, the use of the Organization’s resources, career-related concerns and performance appraisal issues. In recent years, the number of employment-related queries has decreased, from 160 in 2018 to 134 in 2019 and 45 in 2020. The decrease may be

attributed to greater awareness among staff of more suitable resources to address their concerns. In 2020, the Ethics Office also observed that a significant number of traditional employment-related concerns were replaced by telecommuting and health concerns stemming from the pandemic.

2. Pre-appointment vetting

13. The Ethics Office reviewed 69 pre-appointment declarations of interest submitted by individuals under consideration for or newly appointed to senior positions (at the level of Assistant Secretary-General and above, and in mission leadership). Compared with the 92 declarations reviewed in 2019, that figure represents a 25 per cent decrease.

3. Gifts and honours

14. The Ethics Office responded to 47 requests for advice concerning honours, decorations, favours, gifts or remuneration – a significant decrease from 107 such requests in 2019. The decrease may be due to the alternative working arrangements adopted owing to the pandemic and the smaller number of interactions between staff and external partners, which may have reduced the likelihood of staff receiving gifts and honours.

15. While the Ethics Office advises on the appropriateness of receiving or giving gifts, the coordination of gift processing and administration is handled by the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance. The management of gifts is currently decentralized to individual entities, as prescribed in administrative instruction [ST/AI/2010/1](#), and the administering official of each entity establishes and maintains a registry to record summary information on all honours, decorations, favours, gifts or remuneration accepted by staff members.

16. The need for an analysis of the benefits, lessons learned and developmental requirements related to the online global gift registry, launched on a pilot basis in New York in September 2016, was noted. The technical infrastructure used to develop the pilot was not compatible with the Organization's current standard information technology platforms, and therefore no cost-benefit analysis was performed. Instead, it was confirmed that the pilot would need to be migrated to a new platform or that a completely new solution would need to be developed. Drawing on lessons learned and technological developments since the launch of the pilot, the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance started the work, and the technical requirements of the online registry have been revised. In February 2020, the Department revised the functional design with a view to establishing a new consolidated online gift registry. The revision included the development of a full mock-up of the solution. The technical assessment, design and development phases had to be postponed because of conflicting priorities resulting from the current COVID-19 emergency and the complex financial situation faced by the Organization throughout 2020. Two different options are currently being evaluated and will be submitted for consideration, together with the related funding requirements, through the Information and Communications Technology Steering Committee. An update will be provided in the next report of the Secretary-General.

4. Institutional integrity

17. The Ethics Office responded to 45 matters relating to institutional integrity, an increase from 28 such matters in 2019. Institutional integrity issues include potential conflicts of interest involving the Organization's engagement in various business operations with stakeholders. The category also includes requests from the secretariat of the Vendor Review Committee. Such advice covers conflicts of interest and reputational

risks at the institutional level, and due diligence reviews for reputational risks involving external entities. The increase may result from greater awareness in offices and among staff of ethical challenges to the Organization in engaging with other stakeholders.

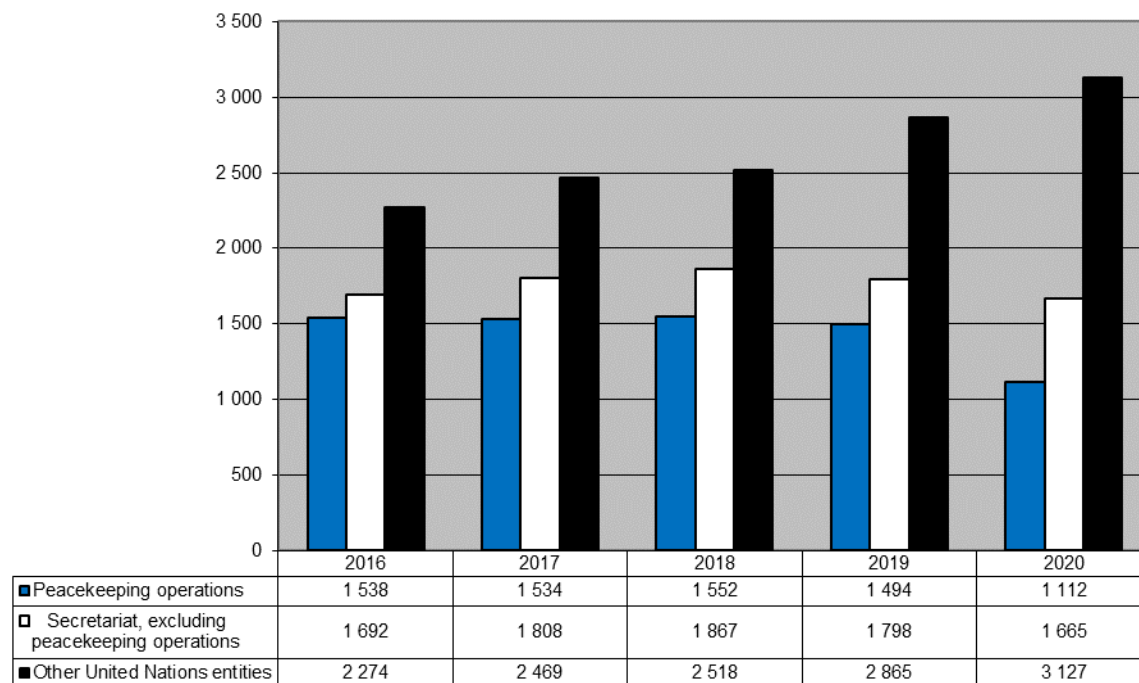
B. Financial disclosure programme

18. The financial disclosure programme – established pursuant to staff regulation 1.2 (m) and (n), and Secretary-General’s bulletin [ST/SGB/2006/6](#) – is designed to assist designated United Nations staff members in identifying, mitigating and managing conflict-of-interest risks arising from their financial interests, personal affiliations or outside activities, or those of their immediate family members. Staff members who file financial disclosure statements enhance the credibility of and public trust in the United Nations by demonstrating that their personal interests do not influence the performance of their duties. Staff members at the D-1 level and above, staff whose principal duties involve procurement and investments or who have access to confidential procurement or investment information, and staff members of the Ethics Office are required to file statements. Their submissions are reviewed by a third-party service provider contracted by the United Nations.

19. During the 2020 filing cycle, 5,904 filers participated, representing a decrease of 253 compared with the 2019 cycle (see figure VI). Of the 2020 filers, 1,624 (27.5 per cent) were first-time filers. Of the total, 5,898 filers submitted their required disclosures, representing a 99.9 per cent compliance rate, the same rate as in 2019. Of the six filers who did not submit the required disclosure statements, five were from non-Secretariat entities and one was from the Secretariat. They were referred to their heads of entities for accountability measures. The annex to the present report includes compliance data for 2020, broken down by entity, pursuant to General Assembly resolution [63/250](#).

Figure VI

Financial disclosure participation, by entity and filing year, 2016–2020



20. While 99.9 per cent of designated filers submitted their disclosure statements for review, 63 (or 1 per cent) did not complete all the procedures required for the closure of their file by 31 December 2020. Such procedures may include responding to requests for clarification or additional information, providing third-party documentation for verification purposes, submitting related documents or implementing recommendations to manage possible conflicts of interest. Staff members whose files were not closed in the 2020 filing cycle will receive additional scrutiny and be reviewed as a priority in the following filing cycle. Those who did not complete the 2020 verification will be included in the verification in the following cycle until the 2020 verification is completed.

21. As in the past, a random sample of approximately 5 per cent of the total filer population was selected to participate in the verification process to ensure the accuracy and completeness of disclosed information. Filers selected for verification were asked to provide third-party documentation for all items disclosed.

22. During the 2020 filing cycle, 224 filers (3.8 per cent) were identified as having a potential conflict of interest, a slight increase from 211 filers (3.4 per cent) in 2019. A total of 264 conflict-of-interest items were identified involving these filers; of those items, 43 concerned financial activities, 179 concerned outside activities, 40 concerned family or personal relationships and 2 concerned other categories.³ Where required, filers were advised to take such action as executing proactive recusals, resigning from leadership positions at non-United Nations entities or ceasing to engage in outside activities.

23. Apart from Secretariat entities, a number of non-Secretariat entities opt to participate in the United Nations financial disclosure programme on a cost-sharing basis. The staff of the ethics offices of the United Nations funds and programmes also participate.⁴ The participation of non-Secretariat entities contributes to enhancing consistency and a common approach to conflict-of-interest management while taking advantage of economies of scale. As shown in figure VI, of the 5,904 filers in 2020, 2,777, or 47 per cent, were staff of the Secretariat, including peacekeeping operations, while 3,127, or 53 per cent, were from other United Nations system entities.

24. In its resolution [70/305](#), the General Assembly decided that its Presidents should provide financial disclosure, in line with the United Nations financial disclosure programme, upon the assumption and completion of their duties. In 2020, the Ethics Office facilitated the submission of the financial disclosure statements of the President of the seventy-fourth session of the Assembly upon the completion of his duties and of the President of the seventy-fifth session upon the assumption of his duties.

25. As in previous years, staff members at the Assistant Secretary-General level and above were invited to participate in the annual voluntary public disclosure initiative of the Secretary-General. Summaries of their confidential disclosures were posted on a rolling basis on the web page of the Secretary-General, beginning in December 2020. The initiative is intended to provide assurance to the public and Member States that senior officials are not influenced by their private interests in the performance of their official duties.

26. Of the 158 eligible senior officials, 126 (79.7 per cent) participated and had their public disclosures posted on the web page of the Secretary-General. A total of 24 (15.2 per cent) opted not to participate on the grounds of security concerns or respect of privacy, or for cultural or personal reasons; 4 (2.5 per cent) did not respond to invitations to participate; and, in 4 other cases (2.5 per cent), the statement review

³ Some filers had more than one item.

⁴ Such participation is in line with the recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit in its report on ethics in the United Nations system ([JIU/REP/2010/3](#)).

was not completed by the posting deadline. The participation rate increased by 6.3 per cent compared with the 2019 initiative.

27. As in the past, the Ethics Office conducted reviews of the disclosures of key management personnel regarding their related-party transactions, under the International Public Sector Accounting Standards. The reviews are conducted for the purpose of determining whether any conflicts of interest exist in relation to the United Nations duties of key management personnel and their related-party transactions, and recommending appropriate action where needed. The outcome of the reviews by the Office is included in the Secretariat's financial statements, which are compliant with the Standards. The summary review report was provided to the Controller and was examined to the satisfaction of the Board of Auditors.

C. Protection against retaliation

28. The policy of the Secretary-General on protection against retaliation for reporting misconduct and for cooperating with duly authorized audits or investigations, as set out in Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2017/2/Rev.1](#), assists the Organization in functioning in an open, transparent and fair manner. The policy encourages the reporting of potential misconduct without fear of retaliation. It enhances protection for those who report misconduct (any violation of the Organization's rules and regulations by staff members) or wrongdoing (that would be harmful to the interests, operations or governance of the United Nations), and those who cooperate with duly authorized audits or investigations.

29. In 2020, the Ethics Office received 138 enquiries under the policy (from 63 women, 66 men, 1 group and 8 people whose gender was not disclosed), representing a 176 per cent increase compared with 2015 and a 32 per cent decrease compared with 2019. From August 2015 to December 2020, the Office cumulatively completed 154 preliminary determinations and referred 40 cases for investigation, upon making a prima facie determination of retaliation. After investigation, the Office made 21 final determinations of retaliation (see table 1 below).

Table 1
Protection against retaliation statistics, August 2015–December 2020

	<i>August 2015– July 2016</i>	<i>August 2016– December 2016^a</i>	<i>January 2017– December 2017</i>	<i>January 2018– December 2018</i>	<i>January 2019– December 2019</i>	<i>January 2020– December 2020</i>
Referrals from the Office of Internal Oversight Services for preventive measures	Not applicable	Not applicable	7	7	12	7
Completed preliminary review	17	10	22	39	36 ^b	30 ^c
Prima facie determination	6	2 ^d	10 ^e	6 ^e	13 ^e	3 ^e
Determination of retaliation after investigation	4 ^f	2 ^g	5 ^h	4 ⁱ	3 ^j	3 ^k

(Footnotes on following page)

(Footnotes to Table 1)

- ^a The previous report (A/73/89) covered the period from 1 August 2016 to 31 December 2017, as proposed by the Secretary-General in his previous report (A/71/334).
- ^b Including one preliminary review that was initiated in 2018 and completed in early 2019.
- ^c Including three preliminary reviews that were initiated in 2019 and completed in 2020, one of which had been put on hold at the request of the staff member concerned.
- ^d Not including one claim that was initiated during the period and referred to the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) for investigation in 2017.
- ^e Including one claim with respect to which the Ethics Office did not find a prima facie case of retaliation and the Office's determination was subsequently reversed by the alternate Chair of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations.
- ^f Including two claims that were initiated and referred to OIOS for investigation in 2015, with respect to which retaliation was established in 2017, and two claims that were initiated and referred to OIOS for investigation in 2016, with respect to which retaliation was established in 2017.
- ^g Including two claims that were initiated in 2017, with respect to which retaliation was established in late 2017 and early 2018.
- ^h Retaliation was established in all five claims in 2017 with respect to cases initiated in previous years.
- ⁱ Retaliation was established in all four claims in 2018 with respect to cases initiated in 2017.
- ^j Includes two claims that were initiated in 2017 and one claim that was initiated in 2018, with respect to which retaliation was established in 2019.
- ^k Including two claims that were referred for investigation in 2019 and one claim that was referred for investigation in 2020.

30. In 2020, 98 of the 138 requests were for advice rather than for protection. Of the remaining 40 requests, 31 resulted in the initiation of preliminary reviews, 7 were referrals from the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) for possible retaliation prevention action and 2 were requests, by staff of separately administered organs and programmes of the United Nations that are members of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, for second-level reviews, to be carried out by the Director of the Ethics Office in her capacity as Chair of the Panel. Staff raising concerns not covered by the policy were referred, as appropriate, to the Management Evaluation Unit, the Office of Staff Legal Assistance or the Office of Human Resources. Misconduct reports were directed through the appropriate channels and, with the consent of the staff members who had raised concerns, individuals received informal support to prevent retaliation, where feasible.

31. The Ethics Office initiates preliminary reviews of alleged retaliation, under the policy, to determine whether the complainant has engaged in a protected activity and, if so, whether the protected activity was a contributing factor in causing the alleged retaliation. Of the 31 preliminary reviews initiated in 2020, 27 were completed and three claims were abandoned (not further pursued by the complainant). The remaining review was completed in early 2021. Since 3 preliminary reviews were initiated in 2019 and completed in 2020, a total of 30 preliminary reviews were completed. Of those, 28 did not present a prima facie case of retaliation. In one additional case, the preliminary review was completed in 2019 and the determination of the Office was reversed by the alternate Chair of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations in 2020. As in the past, the majority of the underlying allegations of misconduct or wrongdoing were about workplace disputes or interpersonal conflict.

32. If the Ethics Office determines that a prima facie case has been established, it refers the matter for investigation. In 2020, the Office referred three cases to OIOS, including one following the alternate Chair's reversal of the determination of the Office.

33. For the duration of the investigation, the Ethics Office may recommend to the Secretary-General interim protection measures to safeguard the complainant's interests. In two cases, the Office recommended interim protection measures, including suspension of the action alleged to be retaliatory. Following consultation,

the complainant in the remaining case did not request interim protection measures, as the Administration had already taken steps to ensure proactive protection.

34. Following referral for investigation, the burden of proof then rests with the Administration to demonstrate by clear and convincing evidence that it would have taken the alleged retaliatory action absent the complainant's protected activity or that the alleged retaliatory action was not taken for the purpose of punishing, intimidating or injuring the complainant. In 2020, after the investigations and an independent review of the findings and supporting documents by the Ethics Office, the Office determined that retaliation was established in three cases,⁵ but not in seven others.⁶ The Office recommended no remedial measures in any of the three cases in which retaliation was established, as the identified retaliator was no longer in the complainant's reporting line and, in two cases, appropriate action to correct the negative consequences of the retaliation suffered had already been taken. The Office did recommend measures to ensure protection against future retaliation where necessary and also recommended referral for possible disciplinary procedures or other appropriate action.

35. The average time taken by the Ethics Office to conduct preliminary reviews, upon receipt of all the information requested for a complaint, was 14.5 days, which is consistent with the 14.2-day average in 2019 and is well within the policy's 30-day timeline.

36. As required by the policy, OIOS will inform the Ethics Office of any report of wrongdoing received that it identifies as posing a retaliation risk, with the consent of the individual concerned. In such cases, after consultation with the individual, the Office may recommend appropriate preventive action to the entity concerned. In 2020, OIOS made seven such referrals. In one of them, the underlying report of wrongdoing concerned sexual harassment. In five cases, the Ethics Office recommended preventive action, including proactive monitoring of the complainant's workplace situation, recusal of staff from exercising any role with respect to the complainant's employment conditions during a renewal exercise, changes to reporting lines and evaluation of the workplace situation to ensure that functions were restored.

37. In 2020, eight complainants sought review by the alternate Chair of the Ethics Panel of the determinations in which the Ethics Office had not found a prima facie case of retaliation. In all eight cases,⁷ the Office's determination was affirmed. In two of the three cases in which review by the alternate Chair was sought in 2019 and completed in 2020, the Office's determination was upheld. In the remaining case, the determination was reversed and the Office referred the case for investigation.

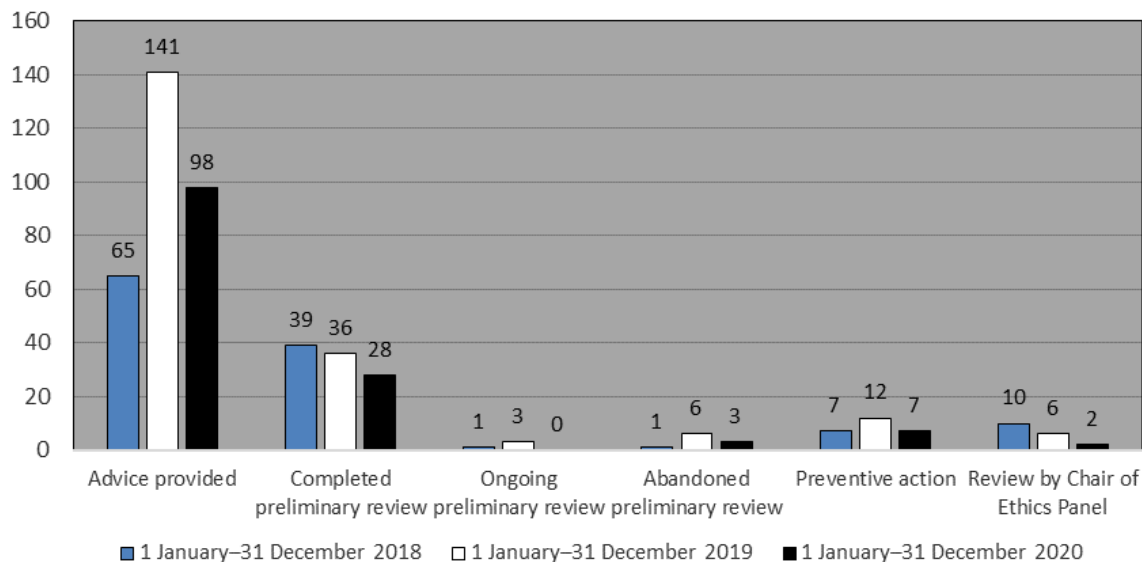
38. The Director of the Ethics Office, in her capacity as Chair of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, received two requests for review at the end of 2020, pursuant to the Secretary-General's bulletin entitled "United Nations system-wide application of ethics: separately administered organs and programmes" ([ST/SGB/2007/11](#) and [ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1](#)). In early 2021, the Chair concurred with the Panel members' determination in one case, and the staff member concerned withdrew his request for review in the remaining case. Figure VII presents all actions taken on enquiries relating to protection against retaliation from 2018 to 2020.

⁵ The three cases include two cases referred for investigation in 2019 and one case referred in 2020.

⁶ The seven cases include six cases referred for investigation in 2019 and one case referred in 2020.

⁷ In two of the cases, review was sought in 2020 and concluded by the alternate Chair in early 2021.

Figure VII
Actions taken on enquiries relating to protection against retaliation, 2018–2020



	<i>Advice provided</i>	<i>Completed preliminary review</i>	<i>Ongoing preliminary review</i>	<i>Abandoned preliminary review</i>	<i>Preventive action</i>	<i>Review by Chair of Ethics Panel</i>
2018	65 ^a	39	1 ^b	1	7	10
2019	142	36	3 ^c	6	12	6
2020	98	27	1 ^d	3	7	2

^a Does not include 16 matters that were not within the Office's jurisdiction.

^b The remaining preliminary review was completed in early 2019; the Office did not find a prima facie case of retaliation.

^c Two of the three remaining preliminary reviews were completed in early 2020; the Office did not find a prima facie case of retaliation in either case. The remaining claim was put on hold at the staff member's request.

^d The remaining preliminary review was completed in early 2021; the Office did not find a prima facie case of retaliation.

39. As required, the Ethics Office met with relevant stakeholders on several occasions to assist with the annual review and assessment of the policy. The review of the policy is ongoing.

D. Outreach, training and education

40. Since it became operational 15 years ago, the Ethics Office has continuously engaged with staff through in-person, remote and digital means to communicate the standards of conduct expected of international civil servants. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office conducted outreach, training and education activities remotely, and one in-person mission had to be cancelled at the last minute. The Office collaborated with other offices in fulfilling its mandate of identifying and addressing ethics-related concerns. It held or was invited to participate in seven virtual town halls (some of which had over 1,000 participants) and other large meetings. The experience of sustained virtual engagement with staff in the past year allowed the Office to harness the benefits of information and communications technology, and to meet the information needs and expectations of staff in a timely

fashion. It shared annual broadcasts and iSeek articles on political activities, the financial disclosure programme and gifts during the holiday period.

41. The Ethics Office conducted 82 tailored ethics briefings, including briefings for newly appointed staff at the level of Assistant Secretary-General and above, as endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution [65/247](#), as well as senior mission staff and resident coordinators.

42. As the travel restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic were not lifted, the Ethics Office conducted or launched virtual outreach sessions with the following missions and offices: the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, the Economic Commission for Africa, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund, the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, the Development Coordination Office, the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the Resident Coordinator Office in Nepal (the session was also attended by the United Nations country team) and the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (the session was conducted in French). As Ethics Office staff are based only in New York, the sessions were often held outside normal business hours to accommodate time differences at the field locations.

43. The 2020 leadership dialogue was on the theme “Acknowledging dignity through civility: how can I communicate for a more harmonious workplace?” The dialogue was part of the Secretary-General’s initiative on fostering civility at all levels at the United Nations and his emphasis on the responsibility of staff for creating a more effective and harmonious work environment. It continued the work done by the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services on the same topic through its civility, communication and community (C3) workshops and civility cafés. About 40,000 United Nations personnel participated, including 20,792 from Headquarters, 15,154 from field missions and 3,966 from other United Nations entities. The Ethics Office helped the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund and UN-Women to launch their dialogues.

44. The mandatory online course on ethics and integrity at the United Nations was completed by 5,636 participants in 2020, bringing the cumulative total to 31,976. In cooperation with the United Nations Children’s Fund, the course was updated and released on a new platform in 2020. The mandatory e-learning course on preventing fraud and corruption at the United Nations had been completed by a cumulative total of 36,023 participants by the end of 2020. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) was given access to the course in a spirit of resource-sharing and coordination.

45. In collaboration with the Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Preparations for the Commemoration of the United Nations Seventy-Fifth Anniversary and the Department of Global Communications, the Ethics Office planned a daily integrity awareness campaign. Beginning in January 2020, each staff member received a pop-up message when logging onto their computer onsite, with the logo “UN75: 2020 and beyond – shaping our future together”. The words “Integrity begins with me” appeared below the logo.

46. In 2020, the Ethics Office website was viewed 113,669 times. The website is available in all six official languages of the United Nations.

E. Standard-setting and policy support

47. Responding to 34 policy-related requests from within the Secretariat and other United Nations entities, the Ethics Office continued to provide independent policy

support. Advice was provided regarding the participation of staff members in outside activities, such as board memberships, employment during special leave without pay and political activities, such as marches. The Office also provided substantive input to various surveys.

48. As in the past, the Ethics Office provided input to enhance the consistency of ethics-related provisions in relevant Secretary-General's bulletins, including the draft policy updates related to the United Nations system-wide application of ethics in separately administered organs and programmes, and the revision of the policy on post-employment restrictions. The Office was consulted on such matters as guidance on the appointment of personal envoys and senior advisers, and political activities in countries where the United Nations assumes an electoral assistance role. The Office also provided input to the Joint Inspection Unit's ongoing review of the ethics function.

V. Ethics Panel of the United Nations and Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations

49. Established in November 2007 and composed of the heads of the ethics offices of the Secretariat and separately administered organs and programmes, the Ethics Panel of the United Nations is mandated to create a unified set of ethical standards and policies, and to consult on complex ethics matters that have system-wide implications, as set out in Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2007/11](#) and [ST/SGB/2007/11/Amend.1](#). The Panel is chaired by the Director of the Ethics Office of the Secretariat. It held 10 formal sessions and a special informal session in 2020. The alternate Chair of the Panel was the Director of the Ethics Office of the World Food Programme from December 2019 to 10 March 2020, the Director of the Ethics Office of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees from 11 March 2020 to 31 August 2020 and the Ethics Adviser of UNFPA from 1 September 2020 for a period of one year.

50. The Panel reviewed the annual ethics reports of its members to exchange information on the activities of their respective entities, in particular with regard to making their policies and programmes more effective. Panel members continued to explore ways to enhance coherence and consistency in presenting data and reporting on activities of the ethics offices. They consulted on how best to communicate advice and guidance to staff on outside activities, including political activities. The Panel jointly issued a staff advisory in June 2020 on participation in marches and demonstrations. As staff worldwide were faced with the COVID-19 pandemic and flexible work arrangements, the Panel exchanged views on ways to strengthen outreach. It focused on conducting virtual training and reaching out to the staff at large to promote positive messaging during such challenging times. The Panel members representing the Secretariat, UNFPA and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees joined a town hall briefing for staff of those entities on United Nations values during the COVID-19 pandemic.

51. The Panel continued to provide resident coordinators and country teams with support and consistent ethics services. Panel members collaborated to provide briefings and other services to country teams, including staff of different United Nations entities. Emphasis was placed on ensuring timely and consistent messaging and guidance on expected staff behaviour regarding outside activities, the personal use of social media, and gifts and honours.

52. With regard to preventing and managing conflicts of interest, the Panel exchanged information on good practices in terms of vetting, financial disclosure and declaration of interest programmes. Members supported their organizations in

strengthening mechanisms and policies to address conflicts of interest, including ways to deal with non-compliance with disclosure obligations.

53. In accordance with section 4.3 of Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2007/11](#), the Chair consulted the Panel on her review of one retaliation case and carried out two initial reviews upon referral. The ethics offices in question were recused from the reviews of their determinations to preserve the independence of the process. Pursuant to section 9 of Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2017/2/Rev.1](#), the alternate Chair received requests for review of eight cases from Secretariat staff (see table 2).

Table 2
Ethics Panel reviews of determinations of retaliation cases, 2015–2020

<i>12-month reporting periods</i>	<i>Chair reviews</i>	<i>Affirmed</i>	<i>Reversed</i>	<i>Alternate Chair reviews^a</i>	<i>Affirmed</i>	<i>Reversed</i>
2015–2016	2	2	–	Not applicable	–	–
August–December 2016 ^b	1	–	1	Not applicable	–	–
2017	3	2	1	3	2	1
2018	9	7	2	5	4	1
2019	7 ^c	6	–	14 ^d	7	1
2020	4 ^e	1	–	8	10 ^f	1 ^g

^a Available only from 2017, with the introduction of reviews by the alternate Chair in the strengthened policy on protection against retaliation for reporting misconduct and for cooperating with duly authorized audits and investigations (see Secretary-General's bulletins [ST/SGB/2017/2](#) and [ST/SGB/2017/2/Rev.1](#)).

^b This five-month reporting period was added to the 2017 report to reflect the transition to calendar-year reporting.

^c In addition to six appeal reviews, one initial preliminary review was held, with the conclusion that there was no prima facie case of retaliation. (That determination was appealed and upheld.)

^d Three cases from the same office were referred back to the United Nations Ethics Office, as new evidence had been presented. The United Nations Ethics Office conducted new preliminary reviews, found prima facie cases and referred them for investigation. Three reviews are pending.

^e In addition to two appeal reviews, two initial preliminary reviews were conducted. In one appeal review, the conclusion was that there was a prima facie case and the matter was referred for investigation. In the other, the conclusion was that there was no prima facie case of retaliation. (One request for review was abandoned in early 2021.)

^f In two cases, the complainants requested review in 2019. In two other cases, the complainants requested review in 2020 and the determination was issued in early 2021.

^g The complainant requested review in 2019.

54. In support of the Secretary-General's efforts to promote system-wide collaboration on ethics-related issues within the United Nations system, the Ethics Network of Multilateral Organizations was established in 2010. Today, entities of the United Nations system, affiliated international organizations and international financial institutions exchange information and good practices for professional development and benchmarking. The Network's membership continued to grow among intergovernmental organizations that had consultative and collaborative arrangements with the United Nations system. Its annual meetings bring together the most senior professionals responsible for ethics functions among its membership. The Ethics Office participated in the twelfth meeting of the Network, held virtually in July 2020 owing to the pandemic, hosted by the World Bank Group and chaired by the African Development Bank. In addition, a separate meeting of the ethics officers of the entities of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination was held to discuss follow-up to the 2018 Joint Inspection Unit review of whistle-blower policies and practices in United Nations system organizations ([JIU/REP/2018/4](#)).

VI. Recommendations for measures to strengthen the independence of the Ethics Office

55. In its resolution [71/263](#), the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to develop “a proposal concerning the independence of the Ethics Office for the consideration of the General Assembly”. Having reviewed the relevant documents, such as the applicable reports of the Joint Inspection Unit (see [JIU/REP/2010/3](#)), the practices of other independent offices, such as OIOS and the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services, and the practices of the members of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations, the Secretary-General proposed three measures for approval and three measures to be noted by the General Assembly.⁸

A. Three proposals for approval by the General Assembly

56. The following three proposals require approval by the General Assembly: (a) direct presentation of the annual report by the Ethics Office to the General Assembly; (b) the enhancement of the role of the Independent Audit Advisory Committee to strengthen the accountability framework by adding to the Committee’s purview the advisory review of the annual workplans of the Office and input into the performance evaluation of the head of the Office, and by authorizing the Office to consult the Committee on matters in which the Secretary-General may have a conflict of interest; and (c) raising the rank of the head of the Office to the level of Assistant Secretary-General (starting with the next head of the Office, if approved).

57. Regarding the direct presentation of the annual report, the Joint Inspection Unit has recommended that each ethics office be authorized to present its annual report directly to the governing body of its organization, rather than through the executive head. All the other members of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations already present their own reports directly to their governing boards or will begin to do so in the future.⁹ The members of the Ethics Panel that already present their own reports to their governing boards have experienced direct reporting as beneficial, including in increasing transparency and accountability.

58. The Independent Audit Advisory Committee has already indicated its support for the proposed enhancement of its role (see [A/73/304](#), para. 110, and [A/74/280](#), para. 9 (k)). It noted that it had “looked at the best practices prevailing in United Nations system oversight entities and found that the majority of oversight committees had the review of the ethics function under their purview” ([A/73/304](#), para. 110).

59. Raising the rank of the head of the Ethics Office (starting with the next head) would promote greater acceptance by senior leadership of ethics advice, since the advice would be provided by a peer at a comparable level. The higher rank would

⁸ To facilitate the review of the proposals initially submitted to the General Assembly at its seventy-third session in the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Ethics Office ([A/73/89](#), para. 94), the Secretary-General reiterated the measures requiring approval by the Assembly, together with information on the related rationale and best practices, in his reports to the Assembly at its seventy-fourth and seventy-fifth sessions ([A/74/78](#) and [A/75/82](#)). The measures to be noted by the Assembly relate to term limits, grounds for termination and post-employment restrictions, and may be found in para. 94 (d), (e) and (f) of document [A/73/89](#).

⁹ The United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Office for Project Services, the United Nations Children’s Fund and the World Food Programme already report directly to their governing boards, while the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East will begin to do so in the future.

reinforce, and would be seen to reinforce, the importance placed by the United Nations on expectations regarding acting with integrity and helping staff to act with integrity.

B. No or negligible impact on the workload, structure and functions of the Ethics Office

60. The Secretary-General's proposals are intended to strengthen the internal governance and accountability of the Secretariat rather than change the Ethics Office's workload, structure, and functions. As such, little change is envisioned in the operations of the Office.

61. Much of the workload of the Ethics Office, as described in sections III and IV above, is demand driven. As outlined in paragraph 5 above, the Office covers around 55,000 staff and non-uniformed personnel (in the case of the protection against retaliation policy). However, the proposals concern the Office's interface with the General Assembly and the Independent Audit Advisory Committee, and the appropriate rank and conditions of service of its head, rather than its activities.

62. The Ethics Office's structure, as an office independent of all other departments and offices within the Secretariat, with its head reporting to the Secretary-General, would remain unchanged. As described in paragraphs 5 and 8 above, the Office, and the related 12 posts, would continue to be based in New York, reaching out to staff through missions and remotely to the population it serves at other duty stations.

63. The functions of the Ethics Office, as outlined in paragraph 4 above, are not addressed in the proposals and remain unchanged. The overall mandate of the Office, which is to assist the Secretary-General in ensuring that staff members observe and perform their functions in a manner consistent with the highest standards of integrity, as required in the Charter, would remain the same.

C. Limited implications for other offices in the Secretariat or the United Nations funds and programmes

64. The strengthening of the Ethics Office's independence would benefit the Secretariat and the Member States by establishing a procedure that would give the Office formal access to the General Assembly, should the need arise; otherwise, the Office would continue to operate as part of the second line in the "three lines of defence" model of risk management and internal control.¹⁰ The ethics function would, through the preventive role assigned to it, continue to contribute to changing the organizational culture to improve the management of administrative risks and risks to mandate fulfilment. The proposals would not change the independent status or role of the Office.

65. Even if the proposal that the annual report of the Ethics Office be submitted to the General Assembly directly, rather than as a report of the Secretary-General, is approved, it is envisaged that the reports will be shared with the Secretary-General for comment. The proposal for the Independent Audit Advisory Committee to conduct the advisory review of the Office's annual workplans and provide input to the performance evaluation of the head of the Office would formalize the informal exchanges and consultations that are currently held.

¹⁰ From the "three lines of defence" model, defined initially by the Institute of Internal Auditors for risk management and control, and adopted by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (see the seventh progress report of the Secretary-General on the accountability system in the United Nations Secretariat (A/72/773), para. 63).

66. The United Nations funds and programmes are either covered by the Secretariat Ethics Office, because they do not have their own ethics officers, or they are members of the Ethics Panel of the United Nations. As noted above, most members of the Ethics Panel already present their annual reports directly to their governing bodies and are covered by their independent oversight advisory committees. There would therefore seem to be no implications for them if the Secretary-General's proposals were approved by the General Assembly.

VII. Conclusion

67. As the world contemplates returning to normalcy in the post-COVID-19 future, the work of the United Nations is needed more than ever. Throughout the pandemic, the Ethics Office has continued to assist the Secretary-General in ensuring that all staff perform their duties in a manner consistent with the values of the United Nations and the highest standards of conduct required of them as members of the international civil service. The Office is committed to continuing to play the same role.

68. The General Assembly is requested to approve recommendations for strengthening the independence of the Ethics Office, as outlined and explained in paragraphs 53 to 64 above.

Annex

Financial disclosure programme compliance level, 2020

<i>United Nations entity</i>	<i>Required filers</i>	<i>Completed filings</i>	<i>Non-compliant(s)</i>
United Nations Secretariat			
Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions	1	1	–
Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate	4	4	–
Department for General Assembly and Conference Management	19	19	–
Department of Economic and Social Affairs	54	54	–
Department of Global Communications	72	72	–
Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance	56	56	–
Department of Operational Support	133	133	–
Department of Peace Operations	28	28	–
Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, including special political missions	31	31	–
Department of Safety and Security	17	17	–
Development Coordination Office	123	123	–
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific	55	55	–
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia	19	19	–
Economic Commission for Africa	72	72	–
Economic Commission for Europe	10	10	–
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean	92	92	–
Ethics Office	12	12	–
Executive Office of the Secretary-General	24	24	–
Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar	2	2	–
International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011	6	6	–
Office for Disarmament Affairs	6	6	–
Office for Outer Space Affairs	7	7	–
Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs	119	119	–
Office of Administration of Justice	2	2	–
Office of Counter-Terrorism	7	7	–
Office of Information and Communications Technology	8	8	–
Office of Internal Oversight Services	12	12	–
Office of Legal Affairs	23	23	–
Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States	4	4	–
Office of the President of the General Assembly	3	3	–
Office of the Special Adviser on Africa	6	6	–
Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Burundi	7	7	–
Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria	8	8	–
Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region	5	5	–
Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen	9	9	–
Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar	3	3	–

<i>United Nations entity</i>	<i>Required filers</i>	<i>Completed filings</i>	<i>Non-compliant(s)</i>
Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict	4	4	–
Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Haiti	1	–	1
Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children	1	1	–
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	23	23	–
Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services	3	3	–
Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate	1	1	–
Peacebuilding Support Office	2	2	–
Regional Commissions New York Office	1	1	–
Special Coordinator on Improving the United Nations Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse	1	1	–
United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq	87	87	–
United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan	67	67	–
United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia	10	10	–
United Nations Assistance to the Khmer Rouge Trials	6	6	–
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development	26	26	–
United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti	17	17	–
United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau	19	19	–
United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant	8	8	–
United Nations Office at Geneva	62	62	–
United Nations Office at Nairobi	58	58	–
United Nations Office at Vienna	14	14	–
United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction	7	7	–
United Nations Office for Partnerships	1	1	–
United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel	13	13	–
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime	70	70	–
United Nations Office to the African Union	5	5	–
United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia	6	6	–
United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa	4	4	–
United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon	13	13	–
United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority	7	7	–
United Nations Support Mission in Libya	27	27	–
United Nations support team to the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission	2	2	–
United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination secretariat	3	3	–
United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia	37	37	–
Subtotal (excluding peacekeeping operations)	1 665	1 664	1
Peacekeeping operations	1 112	1 112	–
United Nations bodies/agencies and others	3 127	3 122	5
Total	5 904	5 898	6