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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

PERSONNEL QUESTIONS

Third report on the implementation of the personnel policy
reforms approved by the General Assembly in 1974

Comments of the Secretary-General

1. The Secretary-General has considered the third report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on the implementation of the personnel policy reforms approved by the General Assembly in 1974 (A/35/418). This note presents the Secretary-General's comments on the recommendations made by JIU and gives an indication of the actions which have already been initiated and which the Secretary-General proposes to take with respect to those recommendations.

2. The JIU, in this third report on personnel policy reforms, focuses its attention on the methods and mechanisms for the recruitment of Professional staff in the Secretariat. Its recommendations are aimed at refining the tools necessary for a more efficient recruitment procedure and ensuring that the best candidates are selected through a fair and objective system. The Secretary-General recalls that in his report on the work of the Organization, 1/ submitted to the General Assembly at its thirty-fifth session, he stressed the need for establishing and maintaining a more rational recruitment policy. Bearing in mind the provisions of General Assembly resolution 33/143, the Secretary-General welcomes the JIU report as a timely and significant contribution to the achievement of that objective.

3. The JIU report deals essentially with questions concerning:

(a) The use of competitive examinations for the promotion of staff to the Professional category;

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Thirty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 1 (A/35/1).

(b) The extension of the principle of competitive examinations to the recruitment of junior professionals;

(c) A more systematic use of the rosters of candidates;

(d) The deployment of resources and possible restructuring of the Office of Personnel Services.

The comments below follow the same order, with particular reference to the relevant recommendations set forth in chapter VII of the JIU report.

Competitive examination for promotion of staff to the Professional category

4. The Secretary-General notes that JIU has endorsed the main features of the first competitive examination held in 1979-1980 for the passage of staff in the General Service and other categories to the Professional category. This new procedure had already been discussed in detail in the Secretary-General's report on the implementation of personnel policy reforms (A/C.5/35/10). The Secretary-General appreciates the understanding shown by JIU of the considerable difficulties that had to be overcome in the introduction of the examination and the exceptional measures that the Secretary-General was obliged to take in order to ensure a smooth transition from the traditional system of department-by-department review to the new procedure. The Secretary-General agrees that such measures should not be applied to future examinations.

5. Since the first examination is still at its final stage, it is not yet possible to comment on its results. The Secretary-General, however, has initiated a review of the experience of the first examination with staff participation. From this review, lessons will be drawn regarding various aspects of the organization of the examination so as to prepare better for the holding of the next examination. In the course of the review, account will be taken of the JIU comments on the format and scope of the examination as well as its suggestions regarding the arrangements to prepare candidates for the examination and the employment of paid consultants to assist the examiners in correcting examination papers.

6. In view of the difficulties encountered and the consequent delays in the completion of the first examination and in order to benefit from the results of the review, the Secretary-General has decided to have the second competitive examination held in the early part of 1981. In determining the number of posts to be made available for that examination, the Secretary-General will be guided by the 30 per cent rule expressed in General Assembly resolution 33/143, but it will not be possible to quantify this percentage by a specific figure, such as 36 as suggested in the JIU report.

7. The Secretary-General proposes to submit to the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session a full report on the results of the examinations as well as the implications of holding such examinations regularly in the future.

Recruitment for junior Professional posts (P-1 and P-2 levels)

8. The second recommendation of JIU would have all posts at the P-1 and P-2 levels in the Secretariat filled through competitive examinations as from 1 January 1983. The Secretary-General believes that, in most cases, competitive examinations are the most appropriate method for selecting candidates for junior professional posts, as called for by the General Assembly in its resolution 33/143. A number of examinations have been conducted both for external and internal candidates which have enabled the Secretariat to acquire valuable experience in this matter.
9. As noted by JIU, the difficulties encountered in holding the examination for passage from the General Service and other categories to the Professional category have prevented the programme of external examinations for junior Professionals from being fully implemented as scheduled in 1979 and 1980. The Secretary-General intends to resume the programme taking into consideration the valuable experience acquired in the meantime. A study of all junior Professional posts in the Secretariat will have to be conducted to determine whether some posts are of such a specialized nature that they would not be suitable for recruitment by examinations designed to test for broad occupational groups. Other competitive methods of selection will therefore have to be used in such cases.
10. The transitional or experimental period recommended by JIU is essential to determine also what effects these examinations will have on geographical distribution of staff in the Secretariat. By identifying candidates for posts at the entry level of the Professional category, the examinations hitherto conducted have assisted in increasing the number of staff who are nationals of some substantially under-represented Member States and in ensuring that some Member States do not become under-represented. With this purpose in mind, the Secretary-General proposes to organize examinations for Member States or groups of Member States taking into consideration their representation in the Secretariat.
11. As to the possible reduction in costs that it is suggested could be achieved, the Secretary-General wishes to note that it is not possible, at this point, to confirm that the generalization of the examination method will prove to be less costly than its use in conjunction with more traditional methods of recruitment since such generalization would require, especially during its initial stage, substantial investments in the building-up of the necessary infrastructure.
12. As regards the periodicity of the examinations it should be noted that since a specialized paper must be designed for each occupational group (and a specialized board of examiners established and interviews conducted), it is the number of occupational groups for which examinations are organized at the same time that largely determines the over-all cost of the examination. To reduce costs, it may be worthwhile to consider holding examinations for only a few occupational groups at any given time, provided that a sufficient number of successful candidates in any given occupation are identified so that vacancies can be filled from the "reserve list" or roster of successful candidates until the next examination in that occupation is organized. The broad occupational groups identified by JIU should generally answer the needs of the Secretariat; however, the experimental phase will be useful in determining whether any adjustments are necessary in this respect.

13. Thus, the Secretary-General accepts the general objective of an expansion of the present programme of competitive examinations for outside candidates for junior Professional posts. During the interim period, one or more such examinations, as resources permit, will be organized in consultation with the Governments concerned for the nationals of Member States or groups of Member States. This period will also afford an opportunity to assess the impact on the Secretariat of the first competitive examination for General Service staff, as well as its cost and the feasibility of adapting its technical features for use in the selection of external candidates. The Secretary-General proposes to submit to the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session a detailed report on the experience acquired in holding competitive examinations for external candidates for posts at the P-1 and P-2 levels.

Recruitment of Professionals at the P-3 level

14. The JIU has also recommended that the Secretary-General should carry out a study of the possibility of extending methods of recruitment by competitive examination to a number of P-3 posts and possibly institute a P-2/P-3 category. The Secretary-General is not in a position at this time to endorse the principle of extending the system of competitive examination to recruitment at the P-3 level. As regards the latter part of the recommendation, the Secretary-General wishes to point out that the coalescing of the two grading levels would not be compatible with the job classification system which defines clearly the functions and responsibilities of posts at the P-3 level as distinguished from the P-2 level. This system is described in detail in the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of personnel policy reforms. Nevertheless, the Secretary-General is prepared to undertake the study recommended by JIU, but would suggest that the report be submitted in 1982, rather than 1981, in order to take into consideration the experience acquired during the interim period.

Systematic use of rosters for recruitment of Professionals at the P-4 level and above

15. The Secretary-General fully agrees with the fourth recommendation of JIU concerning the need for a greater utilization of the rosters of internal and external candidates. The need for a more efficient computerized roster has been already recognized and extensive measures are being taken to improve its quality, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 34/219 of 20 December 1979.

16. The preliminary studies suggested in paragraph 30 of the JIU report will be carried out, as a matter of course, in the context of the introduction in the Secretariat of personnel administration based on the notion of occupational groups. The suggestion of JIU that all posts (and occupations) should be divided into those which are preferably filled by internal promotion and those more suitable for outside recruitment does not appear to have been sufficiently developed. Before proceeding to carry it out it would be necessary to establish criteria on which to base such division and to ascertain the practical advantages to be gained from it.

17. The need for a roster of internal candidates based on an inventory of skills is recognized by the Secretary-General. A basic personnel data file exists which needs to be supplemented by the data required to operate along the lines suggested by JIU.

The use of such a roster would certainly help to solve some of the difficulties experienced in the areas of career development and staff mobility.

18. The recommendations in paragraph 31 of the JIU report regarding the use of the rosters will be carried out subject to the result of the preliminary studies mentioned above. The statement in paragraph 31 (b) that external candidates would be entered in the roster "after a summary review by the Office of Personnel Services" should perhaps be clarified. The staff of that office will conduct a pre-evaluation of the academic background and relevant experience of all external candidates, which will then be transmitted to the substantive Departments and Offices for their own evaluation. In addition, the relevant screening procedures will be reviewed to ensure that the quality of the candidates entered in the roster is such that the usefulness of the roster as a recruitment tool is enhanced.

19. The Secretary-General proposes to report on the subject to the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session in 1982, rather than in 1981 as recommended by JIU, so that the Assembly may consider the matter in conjunction with the Secretary-General's reports on the other aspects of the recruitment procedure referred to above.

Resources to be deployed and restructuring of the Office of Personnel Services

20. The Secretary-General has noted the suggestions relating to the deployment of resources and the possible restructuring of the Office of Personnel Services contained in chapter VI of the JIU report. These suggestions will be reviewed in the light of the over-all needs of the Secretariat in recruitment as well as in other areas of personnel policy reforms.
