



INTERNAL AUDIT DIVISION

REPORT 2024/061

**Audit of programme management at
the United Nations Interregional Crime
and Justice Research Institute**

**Some aspects of strategic planning and
project management need to be strengthened**

06 December 2024

Assignment No. AE2024-383-01

Audit of programme management at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of programme management at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI). The objective of the audit was to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of governance, risk management and control processes for effective management of programmes and projects at UNICRI. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2023 to 30 June 2024 and included a review of risk areas relating to: (a) governance and strategic planning; and (b) project management.

The audit showed that UNICRI planned and implemented its programme of work in alignment with the five key priorities outlined in its Strategic Framework for 2023-2026. However, some aspects of strategic planning and project management need to be strengthened.

OIOS made six recommendations. To address the issues identified in the audit, UNICRI needed to:

- Conduct a donor mapping exercise and establish timelines for finalizing its resource mobilization plan;
- Assess the information security risks for staff in project offices to ensure that all risks are identified and adequately mitigated in line with applicable information security policies;
- Establish checklists or other review mechanisms to enable the Project Approval Committee to assure that project documents contain all the key elements required in the standard project template, and that any variations are justified;
- Build the capacity of project management staff in using the Integrated Planning, Management and Reporting tool for reporting and monitoring of projects; and ensure that variances between planned and actual outputs and expenditures are regularly reviewed and explained in project performance reports;
- Strengthen the feedback mechanisms for its master's degree courses by: (a) exploring ways to improve students' participation in the surveys; (b) incorporating survey questions on the adequacy of course material; and (c) establishing formal mechanisms to obtain post-course feedback from former students; and
- Revisit the thresholds for projects that need independent evaluation based on lessons learned from implementation of the current policy; and establish a mechanism for documenting lessons learned and tracking the recommendations from its self-evaluations.

UNICRI accepted the recommendations and has initiated action to implement them. Actions required to close the recommendations are indicated in Annex I.

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Audit of programme management at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

I. BACKGROUND

1. The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of programme management at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI).
2. UNICRI was established pursuant to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolution 1086 B (XXXIX) of 1965. Its main goal is to assist the international community in formulating and implementing improved policies in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice. It is governed by a Board of Trustees (the Board) under the overall guidance of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.
3. UNICRI's Strategic Programme Framework for the period 2023-2026 had five thematic priorities: (i) preventing and countering transnational security threats, terrorism, and points of nexus; (ii) countering criminal enterprises, illicit financial flows, and corrupt practices; (iii) promoting responsible use of new and emerging technologies to address crime and exploitation; (iv) preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization; and (v) promoting rule of law and safeguarding access to justice.
4. UNICRI is led by a Director at the D-2 level. The previous Director separated from UNICRI in February 2024 and the post had not been filled as of the time of the audit. As of June 2024, UNICRI had a total of 156 staff and non-staff personnel including 31 professional staff, 23 general service staff, 18 senior fellows, 13 fellows, 5 individual contractors, 64 consultants and 2 junior professional staff. UNICRI is headquartered in Turin, Italy with liaison offices in Rome and New York, as well as outposted offices in Geneva, The Hague and Brussels. It also had project offices in Abu Dhabi, Algiers, Manila, Nairobi, Rabat, Tashkent and Tbilisi.
5. UNICRI is fully funded by voluntary contributions comprising General-Purpose contributions from the host country and Special-Purpose contributions for financing specific projects. The General-Purpose contributions constituted on average about 24 per cent of the funding. UNICRI's expenditure for the period January 2023 to June 2024 was \$18.7 million (\$11.9 million in 2023 and \$6.8 million from January to June 2024). As of June 2024, UNICRI had 35 ongoing projects with a multiyear budget of \$36 million.
6. UNICRI used the United Nations' corporate platforms (Umoja and Office 365) as its main data and information management tools. It had also developed spreadsheets to store information and data on projects for planning, reporting and monitoring purposes.
7. Comments provided by UNICRI are incorporated in italics.

II. AUDIT OBJECTIVE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

8. The objective of the audit was to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of governance, risk management and control processes for effective management of programmes and projects at UNICRI.
9. This audit was included in the 2024 work plan of OIOS due to the risk that potential weaknesses in programme management could impact the implementation of UNICRI's mandate.
10. OIOS conducted this audit from July to September 2024. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2023 to 30 June 2024. Based on an activity-level risk assessment, the audit covered risk areas relating to: (a) governance and strategic planning; and (b) project management.

11. The audit methodology included: (a) interviews with key personnel; (b) review of relevant documentation; (c) assessment of systems, practices, and processes for data management; (d) analytical review of data; and (e) sample testing.

12. Analytical review of data included use of data from Umoja and other information systems to determine and assess: (a) budget implementation rates by project; (b) variances between planned and actual activities and outputs; (c) trends in donor funding by year and type of donors; and (d) consultant and travel-related expenditure by project for stratified sampling purposes.

13. The audit was conducted in accordance with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing.

III. AUDIT RESULTS

A. Governance and strategic planning

The Board provided appropriate oversight over the UNICRI programme of work

14. UNICRI programmes were aligned with the five key priorities approved by the Board and outlined in its Strategic Framework for 2023-2026. The Board had clearly defined terms of reference and met twice a year during the period under review. During these meetings, it approved UNICRI's performance reports and programme budgets and reviewed resource mobilization efforts and overall adequacy and effectiveness of programme implementation. Upon the Board's approval, UNICRI submitted its annual report to ECOSOC, which provided an overview of its programmatic activities, achievements and challenges. UNICRI had also developed an entity-level risk register which was approved by the Board in 2023. The risk register addressed key programmatic risks and related mitigating actions.

Need to conduct a donor mapping exercise and finalize a resource mobilization plan

15. UNICRI expected a significant reduction in the annual General-Purpose contributions from the current level of EUR 2.5 million (\$2.7 million) per year to about EUR 1.5 million (\$1.6 million) in 2025. To mitigate this risk, it conducted two scenario analyses to identify possible savings in expenditure to accommodate the expected reduction while ensuring business continuity. However, the potential savings identified were not adequate to cover the anticipated reduction in funding. UNICRI recognized the funding risks and the need to develop a resource mobilization plan to optimize its funding situation.

16. As of the time of the audit, UNICRI had prepared a draft resource mobilization plan for 2023-2026 but it still needed to be finalized and approved by the Board. However, UNICRI had not established timelines for finalizing the resource mobilization plan, nor had it determined its fundraising targets or undertaken a donor mapping exercise. OIOS' analysis of UNICRI's resource mobilization trends between 2019 and 2023 indicated the need and potential for UNICRI to tap into other categories of donors such as philanthropic investors, the private sector and private foundations. A donor mapping exercise could help in ensuring that opportunities to fundraise from all sources are adequately considered and optimized.

17. Between 2021 and 2023, UNICRI used the savings from General-Purpose funds amounting to \$250,000 to implement a range of seed money projects for further research. This was a good initiative designed to add value to UNICRI's programme of work and explore new partnerships and fund-raising opportunities. The Board approved the seed projects, and UNICRI progressively reported to the Board the research results from the projects. OIOS is of the view that the resource mobilization plan should include

a strategy to guide the evaluation and selection of such seed projects to optimize their impact in attracting additional donor funds and stakeholder interest in UNICRI's work.

(1) UNICRI should conduct a donor mapping exercise and establish timelines for finalizing its resource mobilization plan.

UNICRI accepted recommendation 1 and stated that it was updating its mapping of relevant donors. The revised resource mobilization plan will be presented to the Finance Committee of the Board in the first quarter of 2025 and to all the members of the Board in its interim meeting in April 2025.

Need to strengthen measures for governing information security

18. Information security encompasses a variety of measures aimed at safeguarding data from unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration and destruction. The Organization's Information Security Policy requires the identification and protection of information assets. UNICRI was engaged in several information-sensitive projects and is expected to implement adequate data protection measures.

19. A flagship project of UNICRI with an expenditure of \$5 million from January 2023 to June 2024 was executed through UNICRI's seven project offices located outside of Turin in the respective host country premises. The project's scope required UNICRI to adhere to personal data protection measures which would be evaluated in pillar assessments done by the donor. According to the terms of reference of the project offices, data collected during project implementation was confidential.

20. However, the seven project offices were not consistently connected to the United Nations network or UNICRI's Active Directory. The lack of connection to the Active Directory hindered UNICRI's ability to oversee potential data breaches in project offices. UNICRI had not conducted an information security assessment at the time these offices were established to identify information security gaps and the data protection measures required.

21. During the audit, UNICRI initiated additional security measures which included extension of its Virtual Private Network access to staff working outside its office premises. UNICRI needs to conduct a comprehensive risk assessment to ensure that any remaining gaps and risks are identified and addressed.

(2) UNICRI should assess the information security risks for staff in project offices to ensure that all risks are identified and adequately mitigated in line with applicable information security policies.

UNICRI accepted recommendation 2 and stated that it implements the request, whilst also complying with the United Nations standard of secure logins through proprietary networks such as Microsoft Teams and Umoja.

B. Project management

Need to strengthen quality review of project plans

22. UNICRI had a standard project document template that required project managers to comprehensively define all critical aspects of the projects including situation analysis, project description, logical frameworks, budgets and staffing arrangements. The Project Approval Committee had well-defined terms of reference which required it to oversee the quality of project documents ensuring alignment with the strategic priorities approved by the Board, and compliance with the project template requirements.

However, OIOS' review of a stratified sample of 14 projects with a total budget of \$19.2 million (53 per cent of total project budget) showed several areas of non-compliance with the template as explained below:

(a) In two cases, project documents did not have the problem definition as required. A well-defined research problem enables the formulation of project objectives and guides the selection of appropriate research tools where applicable.

(b) In five cases, logical frameworks were not prepared. A well-defined logical framework is essential to facilitate results-based management and effective performance reporting and monitoring.

(c) In three cases, coordination mechanisms were not defined in the project documents. Defining the coordination mechanisms upfront helps ensure that opportunities for coordination with other entities are adequately explored and duplication is curtailed.

(d) In seven cases, UNICRI did not assess risks. Consequently, the project documents did not include risk management and mitigation plans to effectively deal with anticipated challenges. For example, one project faced several challenges during implementation including: (i) delays in funding which impacted its timelines; (ii) difficulty in establishing formal communication channels in the country of implementation; (iii) delayed response from national counterparts; and (iv) inadequate gender balance among the participants in the online training. Such challenges and risks should have been identified upfront so that suitable risk management strategies could be considered in advance and incorporated in the project plan.

(e) In eight cases, sustainability plans which outline the strategies for sustaining the project outcomes and impact beyond their life cycle were not included in the project document. UNICRI explained that in three of the eight cases, project sustainability and visibility plans were discussed with donors. No such discussions took place for the other five projects. Further, sustainability plans need to be documented for monitoring and compliance.

23. The deviations noted above were mainly due to the use of donor project templates which did not always include all the key elements. While there will be cases where donors may require the use of their own templates, the Project Approval Committee needs to ensure that project plans comply with the quality standards stipulated in the UNICRI project template, and any exceptions are justified.

(3) UNICRI should establish checklists or other review mechanisms to enable the Project Approval Committee to assure that project documents contain all the key elements required in the standard project template, and that any variations are justified.

UNICRI accepted recommendation 3 and stated that a revised instruction for the Project Approval Committee, including the review mechanism, will be prepared in the fourth quarter of 2024 and presented to the Finance Committee in the first quarter of 2025 and to all the members of the Board in its interim meeting in April 2025.

Need to strengthen the use of data from Umoja for performance reporting and monitoring

24. UNICRI is expected to utilize the Integrated Planning, Management and Reporting solution in Umoja (IPMR) for results-based management. If the planning module of IPMR is populated with the logical framework information as required, it would facilitate effective performance reporting and results-based management. However, UNICRI staff did not consistently enter all the logical framework information in IPMR because they were still learning how to use it. Mechanisms for reporting the aggregated results did not also adequately utilize information from IPMR.

25. UNICRI developed a Word-based template for aggregated project performance reporting, aiming to summarize each project's achievements in terms of outputs and outcomes. However, the performance reports focused primarily on reporting activities implemented during the reporting period and did not adequately address the progress made towards achieving planned outputs and outcomes, and reasons for significant variations. Determining and explaining such variances would help in identifying lessons learned and making adjustments to the plans during implementation. IPMR has the capacity to provide useful information that could assist in identifying and explaining variances.

26. The aggregated project performance reports did not also adequately address budget variances. UNICRI maintained a separate spreadsheet showing the budget and expenditure information for all the projects in a year, but it did not track the implementation rates for each project and did not explain reasons for budget variances and low budget implementation rates for some of the projects.

27. As of April 2024, UNICRI had 119 inactive grants that were operationally closed but remained financially active in Umoja. Delays in closing projects could lead to delays in utilizing the remaining funds, identifying lessons learned, and dealing with issues such as transfer of assets where applicable. During the audit, UNICRI initiated action to close 80 inactive grants, but 39 other inactive grants remained with a fund balance of \$1.6 million.

(4) UNICRI should: (a) build the capacity of project management staff in using the Integrated Planning, Management and Reporting tool for reporting and monitoring of projects; and (b) ensure that variances between planned and actual outputs and expenditures are regularly reviewed and explained in project performance reports.

UNICRI accepted recommendation 4 and stated that it will organize an internal IPMR training with project managers in the fourth quarter of 2024 and reinforce the necessity to document variances in project performance reports.

Need to strengthen feedback mechanisms for educational programmes

28. UNICRI, in coordination with the University for Peace, conducts two master's degree courses as a part of its Training and Advanced Education projects. Effective feedback mechanisms are essential for continuously identifying lessons learned to enhance programme content and delivery. UNICRI followed a system of collecting feedback from the students on a weekly basis as well as through a final evaluation at the end of the course. The average satisfaction rates in the weekly evaluations were 86 per cent in 2022-2023 and 77 per cent in 2023-2024. The final evaluation in 2023-2024 showed a satisfaction rate of 65 per cent. These were consistent with the results of the OIOS interviews with students and course coordinators.

29. However, response rates to the weekly surveys were generally low. On average, only 32 per cent of the 31 students in 2022-2023 and 28 per cent of the 38 students in 2023-2024 provided feedback to the weekly surveys. The response rate to the final evaluation done for the 2023-2024 academic year was also low at 55 per cent. The lack of sufficient feedback affects the reliability of the results as a tool for identifying lessons learned (i.e., what worked well and what areas require improvement). UNICRI stated that it was working on improving the response rates to the surveys.

30. UNICRI tailored most questions in the weekly and final evaluation surveys to instructor-centric issues without covering the learning material. Further, UNICRI gathered feedback informally from former students during its alumni events. It would be useful if such post course feedback was obtained formally to enhance opportunities for lessons learned.

- (5) UNICRI should strengthen the feedback mechanisms for its master’s degree courses by: (a) exploring ways to improve students’ participation in the surveys; (b) incorporating survey questions on the adequacy of course material; and (c) establishing formal mechanisms to obtain post-course feedback from former students.**

UNICRI accepted recommendation 5 and stated that it had taken action to revise the feedback mechanisms in order to: (a) enhance the participation rate; (b) revise content of surveys to incorporate specific questions on learning material; and (c) establish formal mechanisms for post-course feedback. The revised surveys will be set-up as part of the mandatory activities to be carried out within the framework of the course. This formal mechanism will be replicated in all master’s courses to ensure a steady participation rate, sufficient feedback and reliable results across all activities. The revised surveys, preliminary results and feedback collected from participants will be shared with the Board during its interim meeting in April 2025.

Need to review the project evaluation policy

31. UNICRI’s evaluation policy requires independent project evaluation for projects with a budget equal to or exceeding \$0.5 million, and an indicative budget of \$30,000 to \$40,000 to be allocated in the project budgets for evaluation activities. For projects with a budget below \$0.5 million, the policy requires about two per cent of the project budget to be allocated for evaluation activities. However, due to financial constraints, funds for evaluation were not consistently provided for. OIOS' review of the budgets of a sample of 13 projects with a total expenditure of \$19.6 million showed that except in one case, project budgets had no provision for evaluation.

32. As a result, UNICRI projects were not being evaluated as envisioned in its evaluation policy. Of the 13 projects reviewed, only two had been evaluated by the respective donors. At the time of the audit, there were plans to evaluate one other project with a budget of \$145,000. No evaluations were performed or planned for the remaining 10 projects even though three of them had a budget over \$0.5 million and an independent evaluation was required according to the evaluation policy. UNICRI stated that it self-evaluated the projects through narrative reporting and impact assessments, but this is not a substitute for independent evaluation. Further, UNICRI had not established a follow-up mechanism for documenting lessons learned and tracking the recommendations from its self-evaluations.

33. UNICRI needs to use the lessons learned from implementing its current evaluation policy and also benchmark with other entities to determine more appropriate thresholds for evaluation that are achievable and implementable. UNICRI also needs to consider conducting programme level evaluations to mitigate the absence of project-specific evaluations for smaller projects to assess the relevance and effectiveness of its overall interventions.

- (6) UNICRI should: (a) revisit the thresholds for projects that need independent evaluation based on lessons learned from implementation of the current policy; and (b) establish a mechanism for documenting lessons learned and tracking the recommendations from its self-evaluations.**

UNICRI accepted recommendation 6 and stated that it will revise its evaluation policy by the first quarter of 2025 to be presented to the Board in its interim meeting in April 2025.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

34. OIOS wishes to express its appreciation to the management and staff of UNICRI for the assistance and cooperation extended to the auditors during this assignment.

Internal Audit Division
Office of Internal Oversight Services

STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

Audit of programme management at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical ¹ / Important ²	C/ O ³	Actions needed to close recommendation	Implementation date ⁴
1	UNICRI should conduct a donor mapping exercise and establish timelines for finalizing its resource mobilization plan.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence that the donor mapping exercise has been completed and the resource mobilization plan finalized and approved by the Board.	31 March 2025
2	UNICRI should assess the information security risks for staff in project offices to ensure that all risks are identified and adequately mitigated in line with applicable information security policies.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence that UNICRI has assessed the information security risks for staff in project offices.	31 March 2025
3	UNICRI should establish checklists or other review mechanisms to enable the Project Approval Committee to assure that project documents contain all the key elements required in the standard project template, and that any variations are justified.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of review mechanisms established to enable the Project Approval Committee to assure compliance with key elements in the standard project template.	31 March 2025
4	UNICRI should: (a) build the capacity of project management staff in using the Integrated Planning, Management and Reporting tool for reporting and monitoring of projects; and (b) ensure that variances between planned and actual outputs and expenditures are regularly reviewed and explained in project performance reports.	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of action taken to: (a) build the capacity of project management staff in using IPMR for project reporting and monitoring; and (b) reinforce the necessity to address variances between planned and actual outputs and expenditures in project performance reports.	31 March 2025
5	UNICRI should strengthen the feedback mechanisms for its master's degree courses by: (a) exploring ways to improve students' participation in the surveys; (b) incorporating survey questions on the adequacy of course material; and (c) establishing	Important	O	Receipt of evidence of action taken to strengthen feedback mechanisms for the master's degree courses.	31 March 2025

¹ Critical recommendations address those risk issues that require immediate management attention. Failure to take action could have a critical or significant adverse impact on the Organization.

² Important recommendations address those risk issues that require timely management attention. Failure to take action could have a high or moderate adverse impact on the Organization.

³ Please note the value C denotes closed recommendations whereas O refers to open recommendations.

⁴ Date provided by UNICRI in response to recommendations.

STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

Audit of programme management at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

	formal mechanisms to obtain post-course feedback from former students.				
6	UNICRI should: (a) revisit the thresholds for projects that need independent evaluation based on lessons learned from implementation of the current policy; and (b) establish a mechanism for documenting lessons learned and tracking the recommendations from its self-evaluations.	Important	O	Receipt of the revised evaluation policy and details of mechanisms established to document lessons learned and track recommendations from self-evaluations.	31 March 2025

APPENDIX I

Management Response

Management Response

Audit of programme management at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical ¹ / Important ²	Accepted? (Yes/No)	Title of responsible individual	Implementation date	Client comments
1	UNICRI should conduct a donor mapping exercise and establish timelines for finalizing its resource mobilization plan.	Important	Yes	Director/ Senior Programme Officer (Deputy Director)	31 March 2025	UNICRI is updating its mapping of relevant donors. The revised resource mobilization plan will be presented to the Finance Committee of the Board of Trustees in the first quarter of 2025 and to all the members of the Board of Trustees in its interim meeting (mid-April 2025)
2	UNICRI should assess the information security risks for staff in project offices to ensure that all risks are identified and adequately mitigated in line with applicable information security policies.	Important	Yes	Chief, CMU	31 March 2025	UNICRI implements the request, whilst also complying with the UN standard of secure logins through proprietary UN networks, e.g. MS Teams, UMOJA, etc.
3	UNICRI should establish checklists or other review mechanisms to enable the Project Approval Committee to assure that project documents contain all the key elements required in the standard project template, and that any variations are justified.	Important	Yes	Senior Programme Officer (Deputy Director)	31 March 2025	A revised instruction for the PAC, including the review mechanism, will be prepared in Q4 2024 and presented to the Finance Committee of the Board of Trustees in the first quarter of 2025 and to all the members of the Board of Trustees in its interim meeting (mid-April 2025)
4	UNICRI should: (a) build the capacity of project management staff in using the Integrated Planning, Management and Reporting tool for reporting and monitoring of projects; and (b) ensure that variances between planned and actual	Important	Yes	Senior Programme Officer (Deputy Director)	31 March 2025	Re a) UNICRI will organize an internal IPMR training with project managers in Q4 2024 and then roll-out the system utilization in 2025 Re b) UNICRI will reinforce the

¹ Critical recommendations address those risk issues that require immediate management attention. Failure to take action could have a critical or significant adverse impact on the Organization.

² Important recommendations address those risk issues that require timely management attention. Failure to take action could have a high or moderate adverse impact on the Organization.

Management Response

Audit of programme management at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical ¹ / Important ²	Accepted? (Yes/No)	Title of responsible individual	Implementation date	Client comments
	outputs and expenditures are regularly reviewed and explained in project performance reports.					necessity to document variances in project performance reports
5	UNICRI should strengthen the feedback mechanisms for its master's degree courses by: (a) exploring ways to improve students' participation in the surveys; (b) incorporating survey questions on the adequacy of course material; and (c) establishing formal mechanisms to obtain post-course feedback from former students.	Important	Yes	Programme Management Officer (responsible for the Master/LLM)	31 March 2025	UNICRI has taken action to revise the feedback mechanisms in order to a) enhance the participation rate, b) revise content of surveys to incorporate specific questions on learning material and c) establish formal mechanisms. The revised surveys will be set-up as part of the mandatory activities to be carried out within the framework of the course. This formal mechanism will be replicated in all LL.Ms to ensure a steady participation rate, sufficient feedback and reliable results across all activities. The revised surveys, preliminary results and feedback collected from participants will be shared with the BoT during its interim meeting in April 2025.
6	UNICRI should: (a) revisit the thresholds for projects that need independent evaluation based on lessons learned from implementation of the current policy; and (b) establish a mechanism for documenting lessons learned and tracking the recommendations from its self-evaluations.	Important	Yes	Senior Programme Officer (Deputy Director)	31 March 2025	UNICRI will revise its evaluation policy by Q1 2025 to be presented to the Board of Trustees in its interim meeting in April 2025.