

Staffing matters

Reform of the global internship programme

Report by the Director-General

BACKGROUND

1. In May 2018, the Seventy-first World Health Assembly adopted resolution WHA71.13 on reform of the global internship programme. In the resolution, the Director-General was requested, inter alia, to submit a stand-alone report to the Seventy-sixth World Health Assembly through the Executive Board in 2023, outlining the progress made in achieving the targets set out in the resolution, and the future steps planned.

PROGRESS UP TO JULY 2020

2. Since the adoption of resolution WHA71.13, the global internship programme has implemented a number of reforms to make internships accessible through four key changes:

- (a) the creation of an **application process** that allows candidates to review individual internship vacancies on the website and apply directly for each separate vacancy;
- (b) the creation of a process for increasing the accountability of technical units to recruit interns in line with the principles of **gender balance and geographical diversity**;
- (c) the provision of **in-kind assistance** to all recruited interns in the form of medical/accident insurance and daily meal vouchers; and
- (d) the provision of **financial assistance** for all interns in need (defined as any intern without receipt of formal financial support, such as a grant or scholarship, that is explicitly provided to support the undertaking of an internship).

Application process

3. From 2017 to 2019, the application process evolved from a decentralized to a centralized online application process through the Stellis recruitment platform. During the second half of 2019, the application process was further refined into a system that advertises individual internship positions, whereby candidates apply for each separate vacancy directly. The changes to the application process enabled the following achievements:

- **Transparency of available internships.** All internships are advertised on the website and remain open to receive applications for a minimum period of three weeks. Postings include the terms of reference of the position and projected internship dates, which allows applicants to factor clear timelines into their application decisions.
- **Definitive list of all applications submitted for each vacancy.** This is a significant change compared to the previous process in 2018–2019, whereby applications were submitted through one general vacancy and applicants indicated up to three areas of interest. The new system enables transparency and planning for both the technical units hosting the internship and the applicants.
- **Clear planning by the programme and technical units.** This ensures that internships adhere to all planning and legal requirements and are financially sustainable for the provision of financial and in-kind support to interns.

Gender balance; geographical diversity; at least 50% of accepted interns from low- and middle-income countries

4. The data provided at the Seventy-third World Health Assembly demonstrated an encouraging increase in the percentage of interns originating from low- and middle-income countries and the trend continued into 2020 at 34.0% (compared with 29.5% in 2019 and 25.7% in 2018). Also, the percentage of female interns increased from 72.3% in 2018 to 80.9% in 2020.

In-kind assistance

5. In 2018, the programme began to provide medical and accident insurance to interns free of charge. Lunch vouchers were provided in some duty stations to all interns, irrespective of their financial needs.

Financial assistance

6. Interns who receive little or no external assistance began to receive a living allowance. Following a merit-based selection process, interns complete a financial disclosure form to indicate any grant, scholarship, bursary or other form of support of which they are beneficiaries. They receive a maximum of 20% of the reduced daily subsistence allowance and any external financial assistance declared is deducted from this amount in order to ensure equitable financial support. Each technical unit that hosts an intern provides the Department of Human Resources and Talent Management with a sum equivalent to the full amount of the intern's financial assistance. In this way, no advantage is given to students who receive external assistance, thereby ensuring an unbiased selection process. Funding for the programme is provided by external donors to support travel costs for candidates from low- and middle-income countries. Consideration is being given to the further extension of this support. The programme's financial situation and the number of interns hosted was closely monitored in 2020 so that the model can be adjusted if necessary.

Semi-structured training curriculum

7. Regular induction briefings for new intern arrivals were conducted to provide interns with an introduction to WHO in the areas of governance, programme of work, communications, security, and available internal support services, as well as other key information to help orient them in the internship workplace environment.

Data

8. As requested by the Health Assembly, the human resources annual report includes statistics on applicants' and accepted interns' demographic data, including gender and country of origin. Statistics on WHO interns are provided in Tables 16, 17 and 18 in the workforce data,¹ although no data is provided for the period when the programme was suspended (see paragraphs 9–12 below).

PROGRESS FROM JULY 2020 TO SEPTEMBER 2022

9. The programme was suspended in July 2020 due to the global pandemic situation and associated restrictions on international travel, entry and exit requirements, and quarantine and lockdown measures. Urgent and unforeseen procedures were put in place to support interns who were already in place at the time of the suspension, including:

- (a) contract extensions beyond the normal maximum period and the extended provision of financial and in-kind assistance;
- (b) extensions to official host country permissions and permits; and
- (c) payment of any unforeseen financial burden for interns with regard to COVID testing and any increased costs associated with returning to their home country under restricted circumstances.

10. During the period of suspension, the focus continued on updating the WHO eManual; financial standard operating procedures for the provision of living allowances and daily lunch vouchers; legal considerations; medical insurance; the provision of living allowances; recruitment and onboarding processes; IT recruitment platforms; internal and external webpages; communications; training and induction; and occupational safety, health and well-being.

11. While progress was made, the suspension of the programme impacted the ability to achieve the target for at least 50% of accepted interns on the programme to originate from low- and middle-income countries by 2022.

12. Although the Programme, Budget and Administration Committee of the Executive Board recommended in October 2020 that the Secretariat consider alternative methods for the recruitment of interns during the COVID-19 pandemic, the equity of access, the management of such a process and the mental health of interns in those circumstances were all concerns. Accordingly, possible alternative methods were not further explored.

¹ Workforce data: human resources update [webpage] (<https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/workforce-data> (accessed 14 December 2022)).

OCTOBER 2022

13. Following the decision of the Director-General to lift the suspension of the programme, it was relaunched globally in October 2022. In order to take into account the well-being of interns, a guiding principle for the relaunch was the requirement for accepted interns to work and be supervised in an office environment, with regular in-person contact with the team and supervisor.

FUTURE STEPS PLANNED

14. Following the relaunch, a renewed focus is planned on:

- (a) encouraging the continued advanced planning of interns in all offices;
- (b) providing a semi-structured training curriculum for interns to maximize their training experience and reinforce the learning objectives of the programme;
- (c) ensuring close monitoring and operationalization of the target for at least 50% of accepted interns on the programme to originate from low- and middle-income countries in all WHO offices;
- (d) finalizing discussions on the provision of support for intern travel costs;
- (e) encouraging country offices to increase the visibility of internship opportunities offered by WHO at country level;
- (f) further mobilizing resources for the programme's financial sustainability; and
- (g) steadily increasing the quality of the programme and target the diversity of the universities at which interns study in addition to the diversity of their countries of origin.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

15. Taking account of the information provided on progress made on internship despite the suspension of the programme, and the fact that the programme has been re-launched in 2022, the Executive Board is invited to note the report. The Board is further invited to provide guidance on ensuring financial sustainability for the programme, and to confirm that in the future the Secretariat should continue to report on progress through the annual reports on human resources management.

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