Restricted distribution IOC/IODE-XXVI/6.5

Oostende, 23 February 2021

English only

**INTERGOVERNMENTAL OCEANOGRAPHIC COMMISSION**

(of UNESCO)

**Twenty-sixth Session of the IOC Committee on International Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange (IODE-XXVI)   
online, 20-23 April 2021**

**Performance Review of the IOC Project Office for IODE 2020**

# Introduction

Adam Leadbetter (Marine Institute, Ireland) and Loic Petit de la Villeon (IFREMER, France) were invited by the International Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange of UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC-IODE) to review the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO's (UNESCO/IOC) Project Office for International Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange (IODE).  The IOC Project Office for IODE is supported by a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between UNESCO/IOC and the Government of Flanders through the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ). This MoU was first established in 2005 and renewed in both 2012 and 2017.

The Terms of Reference for the UNESCO/IOC Project Office for IODE are as follows:

1. To establish a creative environment facilitating the further development and maintenance of IODE projects, services and products with emphasis on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the data and product/service stream between the stage of sampling and the user;
2. To assist in strengthening the capacity of Member States to manage oceanographic data and information (by organizing relevant training and the capacity building related activities) and to provide ocean data and information products and services required by users;
3. To liaise and maintain links with relevant UNESCO/IOC programmes and other projects as relevant to the projects implemented by the UNESCO/IOC Project Office for IODE;
4. To establish and maintain links with other relevant organizations, institutions and programmes in order to promote cooperation with the UNESCO/IOC Project Office for IODE.

The reviewers note that the findings and recommendations presented here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of their organisations.

# Context

During the Twenty-fifth Session of the IOC Committee on International Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange (IODE-XXV) and Scientific Conference, Tokyo, Japan, 18-22 February 2019 it was decided to review the IODE project Office activities. This review was requested by IOC/IODE, recalling that the MoU signed in 2017 is due to expire in 2021, and also recalling that Article IV of that MoU states:

*A review of the performance of the UNESCO/IOC Project Office for IODE shall be organized once, and prior to the expiry of this Memorandum of Understanding. The evaluation shall be submitted for approval to the IODE Committee that oversees the Project Office activities. The IODE Committee may, as it deems necessary, recommend the renewal or extension of this agreement and will submit this Recommendation to the next available Session of the IOC Assembly or Executive Council.*

# Objectives of the review

The objectives of the review is to evaluate the IODE project Office activities and to propose or not the renewal of the current MoU between IOC and the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ). The current MoU will expire on 31/12/2021. It was required to evaluate the following areas:

**Organizational performance**

**How effective is the organization in moving towards the fulfilment of its mission?**

* organisational performance (outputs and outcomes, major achievements, productivity, etc.)
* clients served, quality of services and products
* performance of products and services

**How efficient**

* costs versus services provided
* staff turnover, outputs

**If it has kept its relevance**

* adaptation of mission
* meeting stakeholders’ needs
* adaptation to environment

**Financial viability**

**Enabling environment**

* policies
* legislation
* regulations
* funding
* allocation decisions
* technological literacy
* infrastructure and utilities
* major stakeholders (clients, donors, beneficiaries, etc.)

**Organizational motivation**

**Organization’s history**

* establishment
* major achievements
* major struggles
* changes in size, program, etc.
* major projects and funding

**Mission**

* evolution of mission statement
* organizational goals
* role of mission in shaping the organization
* articulating research and research products

**Organizational capacity**

**Strengths and weaknesses**

* leadership
* strategic planning
* business model
* financial planning
* governance
* facilities and technology management
* HR plans

# Methodology and documents provided

## Methodology

It was initially required that the reviewers should undertake one or more visits to the IOC Project Office for IODE to meet with the Office staff, representatives of the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) and, if deemed necessary, with representatives of the Government of Flanders (Kingdom of Belgium).

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the reviewers were unable to undertake the recommended visit to the IOC Project Office for IODE to meet the Project Office staff, representatives of VLIZ and the Government of Flanders. However, the reviewers made use of virtual meetings and e-mails to interview both Project Office staff, and key stakeholders from a wider group than that laid out in the Terms of Reference for the review.

The following questions were asked to those persons interviewed (outside of the IODE Project Office staff):

* How would you describe the relevance of the IODE Project Office in the current marine data landscape and for the future?
* What would you say are the strengths and weaknesses of the IODE Project Office?
* What do you consider as the major achievement of the IODE Project Office?
* We have been asked to review the performance of the IOC project office for IODE as part of the MoU with the Government of Flanders. Is there anything you think should be added to that MoU?

## Documents provided

* 2017-03-IOC-VLIZ MoU terms and engagements of each part (5 pages)
* EC43 document on the project office MOU « Renewal of the MOU between the Government of Flanders and IOC regarding the IOC Project Office for IODE, Oostende, Belgium (24 pages) 2010
* IOC Project Office for IODE - renewal justification final « IOC Project Office for IODE: towards a new MoU ; 24 pages 2016
* Annex 1: PROPOSED MODALITIES FOR THE PERFORMANCE REVIEW OF THE IOC PROJECT OFFICE FOR IODE
* Renewal MoU project office IODE 22 pages 2010

From the Terms of Reference for the review, the strategic vision for the IODE Project Office is difficult to assess as neither a strategic vision for the next 5-10 years nor a set of Key Performance Indicators exists for the Project Office. It is noted by the reviewers that a strategic vision for UNESCO/IOC does not exist either, and that the reviewers were told during interviews that this is due to the uncertainty in funding for UNESCO/IOC outside of a two-year envelope allocated biannually.

The reviewers note that the MoU between VLIZ and UNESCO/IOC clearly states that an annual report should be presented to the Government of Flanders. However, only one such report was made available to the reviewers.

# Results and Recommendations

A number of achievements of the Project Office were highlighted to the reviewers. These are summarised as follows:

* The brand of the Project Office. The Project Office is perceived by many stakeholders to be uniquely positioned as the only global organisation for coordination of oceanographic data management. The Project Office has the ability to manage a wide ranging portfolio of important projects in this space with partners of very different capacities, from the regional Ocean Data and Information Networks for developing nations through to the Ocean Best Practices project. Stakeholders also report that the visibility and capabilities of IOC-IODE are enhanced in a way that was not possible before the establishment of the Project Office primarily due to the enthusiasm and dedication of the Project Office staff. Those interviewed also praised the IODE Project Office for acting as an "honest broker", showing impartiality to its various projects and stakeholders. Stakeholders from the southern hemisphere noted that the hub nature of the Project Office means it does not feel European or Northern Hemisphere centric.
* Following on from this, the solid team ethos of the staff at the Project Office was praised. Their dedication to excellence and the mission of IOC-IODE was noted as being impressive. It was noted that stakeholders have seen occasions where the staff have worked to meet challenges arising under difficult circumstances. The Project Office staff were praised for working very well as a team, whilst all being very capable of working individually as well.
* The adoption of the Ocean Biodiversity Information System (OBIS) as an IOC-IODE project hosted at the Project Office when other arrangements fell through has been widely praised. OBIS is now maintained and sustained, with its own staff, but with full support from the Project Office
* Both phases of the Ocean Teacher Global Academy (OTGA) project have been deemed successful by stakeholders, with OTGA seen as a flagship project to widen UNESCO/IOC’s capacity development capabilities. OTGA has allowed for the transfer of technology and data management training, moving from using three dedicated enthusiasts being funded by their home organisations, to having a full time training coordinator, running a wider range of courses at the Project Office's facilities. Courses delivered now cover a broad range of topics of relevance to UNESCO/IOC, extending well beyond data management. In addition to the on-site facilities, the availability of a web-based training platform allows OTGA to cater for face-to-face or distance learning, or a blended approach.
* The initiation of the Ocean Data Information System and OceanInfoHub were noted as key recent achievements of the Project Office. OceanInfoHub is a long-term vision of UNESCO/IOC and its development and prototyping are now being facilitated through the Project Office. OceanInfoHub will be a key support to the UN Decade of the Ocean for Sustainable Development. OceanInfoHub will build on a number of highly successful IODE initiatives, including the OceanExpert directory.

Similarly, a number of strengths of the IODE Project Office were identified:

* Those interviewed identified a number of strengths of the IODE Project Office. One strength is the consistent and coherent mission of IODE throughout its history “to enhance marine research, exploitation and development, by facilitating the exchange of oceanographic data and information between participating UNESCO/IOC Member States, by meeting the needs of users for data and information products”. As demonstrated by the Ocean Info Hub project, this mission remains relevant to this day.
* As noted above, the IODE Project Office team of staff is a strength, and the expansion from one initial member of staff to the current level is to be praised. Again, it is noted as a strength of the Project Office that the staff were commended for their communications and maintaining the IT infrastructures at the Project Office site and the numerous websites operated by IODE.
* Further, the co-location of the IODE Project Office with VLIZ on the site in Oostende is recognised as a key strength of the Project Office. This co-location allows the IODE community with access to excellent facilities (including, but not limited to, the meeting and training rooms and equipment, etc.). It is noted that these facilities have enabled the expansion of the activities of IODE to include such projects as the OceanTeacher Global Academy. These facilities have also allowed the IODE Project Office to become a meeting place for many projects, including those outside of the IODE portfolio.

Those interviewed also highlighted some weaknesses that the operating environment of the IODE Project Office creates, and other areas of opportunity for the IODE Project Office to develop:

* First is the low staffing level, articulated as "the strength of the Project Office is the people; the weakness is the lack of people." The staffing level as it stands is seen by many of those interviewed as creating a number of single dependencies in the project office, and succession planning, knowledge exchange, particularly of the operating environment around UNESCO/IOC and the IOC-IODE are all crucial.
* The hiring and retention of appropriately skilled full-time staff to supplement the current staff, particularly to enhance the digital and information technology capabilities, are key to the sustainability of the activity of the IODE Project Office. This would extend the range of skillsets and capabilities of the IODE Project Office.
* A second perceived single dependency is the reliance on the project funding from the Government of Flanders, and the sustainability of the IODE Project Office if this funding were removed for any reason in the future. It should be noted that, at the time of writing, there is no indication that this funding would be withdrawn. An issue related to a diversification of funding for the IODE Project Office that the operating environment of the IODE Project Office limits its ability to respond rapidly to involvement in European Union framework projects and contracts. Some options to mitigate this can be found in the following section.

# Summary of Recommendations

Based on the results outlined above, the reviewers identified a number of areas which the IODE Project Office should consider in the future. These are detailed below:

1. In terms of conducting a performance review of the IOC Project Office for IODE, no Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the Project Office exist to provide a baseline for such a review. The reviewers recommend that the IODE Project develops and agrees a clear set of KPIs with its key stakeholders (UNESCO/IOC and VLIZ).
2. Similarly, it is recommended that the IODE Project Office improves its annual reporting to both VLIZ and to the IODE community as a whole. These reports should include summary achievements from all IODE projects and highlight the impact of the IODE Project Office and the overall IODE programme. Such reporting will allow better communication of the results of the IODE programme to all stakeholders and to provide interim updates to the IODE network between IODE sessions and between UNESCO/IOC sessions.
3. A related recommendation is that methods to better assess and report the impact of the training facilitated through the OceanTeacher Global Academy are investigated and adopted.
4. The strong brand of the IODE Project Office should be more prominently displayed on the various portals operated by the IODE Project Office. Each of these portals should have a clear and distinctive purpose which is well described. The IODE brand could also be strengthened by clarifying IODE's relationships with the Global Ocean Observing System (GOOS) and the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) (amongst others) on the IODE website, and perhaps through a full website refresh. This should also help to focus which projects are most clearly in IODE’s domain, and which are most clearly in the domain of, for example, GOOS or WMO. Similarly, the IODE Project Office is encouraged to promote its brand and its activity including through Ocean Info Hub and Ocean Teacher Global Academy activities more prominently in communications for the UN Decade of the Ocean for Sustainable Development. The reviewers note the strong capacity of the IODE project office to conduct cross-cutting activities such as capacity building, training, marine information and data management projects, and operating various web portals.
5. The reviewers noted that those interviewed universally praised the strong efficiency of the IODE Project Office secretariat under the strong leadership of Mr Peter Pissierssens for IODE. The reviewers identified the necessity for succession planning for the retirement of Mr. Pissierssens and if possible to have some overlap in tenure between Mr. Pissierssens and his successor.
6. Due to the administrative structures under which the IODE Project Office exists, it is difficult for the Project Office to become involved in European Union funded projects, including Horizon funded projects and EASME contracts, such as the EMODnet lots. For example, it is noted that the European Union has made significant investments through Horizon funding in open data and open science, which IODE is well placed to contribute to. The reviewers recommend that structures which allow more responsiveness to the Project Office's involvement in such projects are examined, such as a subsidiary entity or an international association without lucrative purpose (AISBL). This may also require reaching out to sectors that are not traditionally involved in IODE Project Office activities, in particular private sector industry.
7. Sustainability plans for the key and/or highest-priority IODE projects should also be developed in order to maximise the potential reach and impact of the projects. These sustainability plans should consider the continued and furthered use of blended teaching platforms for OceanTeacher Global Academy courses as was successfully trialled in 2020. It was also suggested to the reviewers that more autonomy for the Regional Training Centres should be considered as an element of the sustainability of Ocean Teacher Global Academy.
8. The goal of more sustainable funding and improved ability to respond to project calls should be facilitated by the expansion of the IODE Project Office staff, in particular on the IT side. Currently, IT staffing is limited to one member but this puts limitation on the technical support and leadership that the Project Office can provide, especially when considering projects such as Ocean Info Hub. The hiring and retention of extra full-time staff with skills in digital and information technologies would also help the IODE Project Office maintain its relevance in the rapidly and ever changing data management landscape, and to cement IODE's role in the FAIR-ification of ocean data.
9. The staffing level could be further mitigated in the short-term by encouraging secondments and internships to the IODE Project Office from a wider range of UNESCO/IOC member states, particularly in the IODE Project Office's role with respect to UNESCO/IOC's capacity development strategy.

# RECOMMENDATION

The reviewers recommend the renewal of the MoU between IOC and the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ).

**List of Acronyms**

AISBL Association internationale sans but lucratif (International Non-Profit Organisation)

FAIR Findable-Accessible-Interoperable-Reproducible principles of data management

IOC-IODE The International Oceanographic Data and Information Exchange of UNESCO/IOC

KPIs Key Performance Indicators

OBIS Ocean Biodiversity Information System

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

UNESCO/IOC The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO

VLIZ Flanders Marine Institute

**Annexe 1 – List of Interviewees**

* The staff of the IOC Project Office for IODE
* Sergey Belov, Co-Chair, International Oceanographic Data Exchange (IODE), IOC of UNESCO; Deputy director, Ph.D, All-Russian Research Institute of Hydrometeorological Information - World Data Center (RIHMI-WDC)
* T.F. de Bruin, NIOZ Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research, IODE Co-chair
* Cynthia Chandler, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, United States of America
* Ann-Katrien Lescrauwaet, PhD, Director International Relations, Vlaams Instituut voor de Zee vzw (Flanders Marine Institute), Belgium
* Dr. Lesley Rickards, British Oceanographic Data Centre, United Kingdom
* Capt. Ariel Hernán Troisi, Technical Secretary. Servicio de Hidrografía Naval. Argentina
* Gert Verreet, Advisor, Research Division Flanders Department of Economy, Science and Innovation, Belgium

[END OF DOCUMENT]