Unesco's Global Ethics Observatory

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GLOBAL ETHICS

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The Global Ethics Observatory, launched by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization in December 2005, is a system of databases in the ethics of science and technology. It presents data on experts in ethics, on institutions (university departments and centres, commissions, councils and review boards, and societies and associations) and on teaching programmes in ethics. It has a global coverage and will be available in six major languages. Its aim is to facilitate the establishment of ethical infrastructures and international cooperation all around the world.

The Global Ethics Observatory (GEObs) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco) was officially launched in Tokyo, Japan, during the 12th Session of the International Bioethics Committee (IBC) in December 2005 (www.unesco.org/shs/ethics/geo/user/?action = select&lng = en&db =). The GEObs is a network of global databases in bioethics and other areas of applied ethics such as environmental ethics, science ethics, engineering ethics and technology ethics. During the launch, the following GEObs databases were brought online.

Database 1: Who's Who in Ethics

This database is a compilation of information on ethics experts around the world. Data are entered after reviewing a questionnaire submitted, indicating recent publications in the ethics of science and technology, involvement in ethics research projects and teaching programmes, and the level and extent of experience with ethics in the person's educational and professional background.

Database 2: Ethics Institutions

This database provides information on departments, institutes, centres, commissions, councils, committees, review boards, societies, associations and other relevant entities in the area of ethics of science and technology. Institutions in the database have been validated against their mission, activities and publications as a confirmation of their active involvement in the field of ethics of science and technology.

Database 3: Ethics Teaching Programmes

This database contains descriptions of existing teaching programmes focusing on bioethics and the ethics of science and technology. Data are collected through standardised forms presenting, for example, objectives, methods, syllabi, literature and teaching hours.

The designing of additional GEObs databases is in progress. These databases will be implemented in later phases and include a fourth database, Ethics Related Legislation and Guidelines, which is a collection of examples and descriptions of legislation and guidelines introduced in various countries and institutions worldwide.

UNESCO AND THE ETHICS OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Unesco's involvement in promoting ethics, in particular bioethics, started in the 1970s. It eventually led to the creation of the organisation's Ethics of Science and Technology Programme in 1993. It addresses two major concerns: (1) the rapid pace of scientific development is not necessarily benefiting the entire international community and (2) unbridled scientific progress is not always ethically acceptable. This is the reason why Unesco aims at strengthening the links between scientific advancement and the cultural, legal, philosophical and religious contexts in which it occurs. Because this role is becoming increasingly important, the member states decided in 2002 that the ethics programme is one of Unesco's five priority work areas.

With wide support from various stakeholders, Unesco was able to establish the IBC in 1993, and the Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee and the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology in 1998. These bodies ensure independent, multidisciplinary advice on ethics that fits the needs of the international community, both in terms of intellectual clarification and consensus building. The common work of the IBC, composed of independent experts and of the Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee, in which governments are represented, successfully spearheaded the adoption of the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights in 1997 and the International Declaration on Human Genetic Data in 2003. Normative efforts were expanded to cover the whole field of bioethics with the unanimous adoption of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights in October 2005.

It is Unesco's mission to ensure that science contributes towards peace and prosperity around the world. Human rights, human dignity and the rule of the law must also be fostered in the realm of science and technology. The ethics programme is therefore at the core of Unesco's mission, and Unesco, with its unique mandate given by its 191

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Abbreviations: GEObs, Global Ethics Observatory; IBC, International Bioethics Committee; Unesco, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

member states, has a leading role in bioethics and the ethics of science and technology within the United Nations.

GEObs: A STRATEGIC MILESTONE

In this framework, the launch of GEObs represents an essential and strategic milestone in the continuity of Unesco's efforts. The observatory will facilitate the implementation of the normative standards developed in the last decade by becoming a portal with which existing international consensus can be more efficiently mobilised to achieve the objectives of these instruments at all levels of global society. It will also provide a platform on which new activities can be initiated, as the data contained within the observatory will help to identify stronger and weaker ethics infrastructures around the world. Furthermore, the mapping of ethical expertise around the world through the GEObs databases will be made widely available. This will be of particular use for member states looking to reinforce their ethics infrastructure, but also for people and institutions looking for partners, especially in developing countries.

As such, the GEObs is designed to serve as a valuable reference, collaborative, consultative and comparative resource hub of ethics activities around the world. The observatory is also intended to become a crucial platform for supporting and advancing ethics activities by assisting member states and other interested parties to identify experts, establish ethics committees, construct informed policies in the area of ethics and design ethics teaching curriculums.

Collectively, the Who's Who in Ethics and Ethics Institutions databases enable the GEObs to efficiently connect specific needs and requests with the appropriate experts and institutions. The Ethics Teaching Programmes component of the observatory is strategically positioned to support and encourage collaboration in the design of ethics curriculums. Finally, by providing the information within the Ethics Related Legislation and Guidelines database, the observatory establishes a valuable platform for sharing of knowledge and experiences in policy making and management of ethical issues in science and technology.

ACCESSING THE DATABASES

The GEObs databases are freely accessible online to all member states and the general public at http://www.unesco.org/shs/ethics/geobs.

Although the initial deployment of the GEObs is only available in a limited number of languages, to facilitate global accessibility, the system will eventually be available in all six official languages of Unesco: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. The GEObs Secretariat is located in Unesco, Paris, with language and information support from a regional centre in Vilnius, Lithuania (taking care of the Russian language version). The establishment of additional regional centres to support the GEObs in Arabic and Chinese languages is in progress.

Users are able to explore the databases via a number of search criteria, and print or email relevant search results. In the Who's Who in Ethics database, users are able to search for experts in the database based on name, country, region, professional background, ethics activities, type(s) of affiliated institution, areas of interest in applied ethics, ethics expertise or involvement with Unesco. In the Ethics Institutions database, searches can be made using region, country, type of organisation (including level of operation, membership size and meeting frequency among other secondary criteria), foundation date, areas of applied ethics and activities. In the Ethics Teaching Programmes database, possible search criteria include country, region, name of teacher, faculty–department–school of the teacher, city of university, academic background of students, area of ethics, level of university teaching, course language, number of students enrolled, number of teaching and student working hours, status and objectives of the programme, type of study materials and topics included in the syllabus. On all GEObs databases, users are also able to use various sort options for their search results.

CONTRIBUTING TO GEObs

The databases launched in GEObs mark the beginning of a continuous process of building a reliable, comprehensive and useful baseline to analyse what exists in the field of ethics in terms of experts, institutions and teaching activities. Unesco's Division of Ethics of Science and Technology encourages all interested parties to participate in expanding the information in the databases, to provide feedback on the areas in which they can be improved and to use the information. (For this and for further information, please contact The GEObs Secretariat, Division of Ethics of Science and Technology, UNESCO, 1, rue Miollis, 75732 Paris Cedex 15, France; email: geobs@unesco.org.)

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