



PIOB’s Public Interest issues: IESBA projects

The PIOB’s recommendations are based on the proposals discussed by the IESBA as of March 2021.

For further information and details about the IESBA projects, please refer to the IESBA website: <https://www.ethicsboard.org/consultations-projects>

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ONGOING PROJECTS

Definition of PIEs
Importance of the definition of PIE
<p>The definition of PIE is crucial to determine the categories of entities that are subject to stricter provisions in the Code (and the ISAs), such as NAS and Fees.</p> <p>The PIOB believes the definition of PIE should include all entities with a public interest, due to their impact on society (e.g. financial institutions, listed companies, significant utility companies), as well as those defined as PIEs by national regulators in their own jurisdictions, to ensure the global applicability of the Code of Ethics. Consideration should be given to any other entities outside the financial sector that could pose a threat to financial stability, to ensure that the proposed list achieves the overarching objective and that there are no evident gaps. The PIOB notes that one of the factors considered in the ED to determine the extent of public interest of an entity is “the potential systemic impact on other sectors and the economy as a whole in the event of financial failure of the entity”.</p> <p>The PIOB also notes the Overarching objective proposed by IESBA that reflects the “significant public interest in the financial condition” of these entities and that the purpose of having differential requirements is “to enhance confidence in their financial statements through enhancing confidence in the audit of those financial statements”.</p> <p>The PIOB welcomes the approach followed by IESBA setting a broad definition of PIEs, with an extended list of factors that help define these entities and an expanded list of entities categorized as PIEs within the Code. This list would then be further refined by local regulatory bodies and expanded by audit firms, if applicable. The PIOB agrees that this approach allows to consider scalability and may facilitate consistent application across different jurisdictions.</p>
Transparency needed on the entities treated as PIEs

Definition of PIEs

Transparency is key to ensure there is certainty for the users of the audit report and financial statements on the rules applied to an entity and to achieve enhanced confidence in the audit of PIEs. The PIOB welcomes the provision in the Code that requires firms to disclose the treatment of entities as PIEs and urges both the IAASB and IESBA to ensure this transparency is achieved in a manner that is readily accessible for users. The PIOB notes that the options for achieving this include disclosure in the auditor report.

Coordination with the IAASB

The PIOB notes the coordination between the IESBA and the IAASB, which is of critical importance to ensure alignment of the ISAs with the Code of Ethics and the application of the two sets of standards consistently.

The PIOB acknowledges that a case-by-case assessment would need to be made by the IAASB to ensure that replacing “listed entities” with “PIEs” in the current ISAs and Quality Management Standards does not create unintended consequences.

However, in order to ensure the alignment of the ISAs with the Code, the IAASB should consider that continuing to limit the additional requirements in the ISAs to only a subset of entities, such as “listed entities” or the finally agreed term (such as “publicly traded entities”), should be explicitly justified, providing an explanation on why it would not be appropriate to apply the differential requirements to all PIEs.

Technology

The use and impacts of technology is one of the most important issues the profession will face in the current decade. The pervasive nature of technology, and its broad and exponentially growing use, pose significant ethical challenges which it is in the public interest for the IESBA to address in a comprehensive and timely manner. COVID-19 effects and the accelerated adoption and development of technology are additional reasons for urgency.

The PIOB appreciates the extensive and careful work done to date on the topic. It welcomes the IESBA’s establishment of a Technology Working Group (TWG) which will focus on developing non-authoritative guidance and gathering of information, to complement the ongoing work of the Technology Task Force (TTF) which will now focus on the preparation of Code changes.

The need for an ethical framework for the understanding and use of technology

The PIOB welcomes the IESBA’s consideration of the ethical implications of a professional accountant (PA) using, or encouraging their clients to use, technology which may be more complex than the PA can understand, or about which they have insufficient knowledge to comply with the fundamental principles of the Code.

Technology

Whether the IESBA addresses this in a specific or a holistic manner (or a combination of both), it is important that the Code signals clearly the level of competency, and the nature of professional judgement, that are needed to ensure an ethical approach.

It is similarly in the public interest for the IESBA to address within the Code, and supported where appropriate by guidance, how to evaluate ethical threats and biases when audit practitioners and firms use automation and artificial intelligence to perform audit procedures.

Independence issues and NAS

The PIOB appreciates the TTF's consideration of how the offering of new tools and services by audit firms (through sale or license to audit clients) should be understood in relation to the NAS section (600) in the Code and be subject to independence requirements (assessment of threats and prohibition to provide those services).

The PIOB notes this as a particular area where wider stakeholder input (see below) is needed to understand fully, and address, the nature of the threats involved and their impact on auditor independence (whether actual or perceived).

Effective co-ordination of effort is important for timely progress

Co-ordination between the TWG and the TTF will be critically important to the IESBA's responsiveness on this issue. While the PIOB acknowledges the reasons for the IESBA's decision to defer the approval of an Exposure Draft of Code changes until December 2021, timely progress remains a critical matter of public interest.

The PIOB acknowledges that, in the immediate term, the TWG will focus on providing guidance on topics of immediate interest and concern, recognising that some topics have aspects of deep complexity and detail which it is not appropriate for the Code itself to address. But it also notes that the resources needed to develop those materials should not be at the expense of those needed to progress the Code changes themselves, in particular those concerning issues of complexity and independence, in accordance with the revised timetable.

External engagement needs to be broadened

Another critical factor in ensuring responsiveness to the public interest is the nature and extent of stakeholder engagement. The surveys conducted by the TTF in 2020 ("Technology and complexity in the professional environment" and "The impact of technology on auditor independence") showed an imbalance in the input received, where the majority of respondents belonged to the audit profession and there was a very low level of participation from investors, regulators and other stakeholders.

It is essential to obtain views from a broader and more complete group of

Technology

stakeholders. To achieve this, the PIOB urges the IESBA to conduct further, and if necessary targeted, outreach with the user community (including investors), regulators, corporates (including Those Charged With Governance), technology providers and data science experts, and non-financial standard setters.

Working with other projects and the IAASB

The pervasive nature of the technological challenges also raises the need for broader co-ordination, including with other IESBA projects (such as Tax Planning) and the IAASB.

Engagement Team and Group audits

Definition of Engagement Team and opportunity for the IESBA to strengthen independence requirements in the Code

The PIOB welcomes the coordination efforts between IESBA and IAASB to align and simplify the definitions of Engagement Team in the Code.

The interaction of multiple definitions, individuals with different characteristics, consideration of entities as PIEs or non-PIEs, related entities and component auditors, requires careful consideration as it may have consequences on auditors' and firms' independence.

The PIOB encourages IESBA to take the opportunity not only to improve the definitions in the Code, but to strengthen independence requirements around component auditors outside the network and the associated responsibilities of the group engagement partner. However, the interactions of multiple definitions, individuals with different characteristics, consideration of entities as PIE or not, related entities and components can add unnecessary complexity to the provisions. Despite that, the standard needs to be clear and understandable to be in the public interest. Implementation guidance may be necessary to ensure consistent application of the provisions.

See additional comments below related to the independence of external experts.

Tax planning and related services

Tax planning and related services project should be advanced

The revision of consequences of unethical tax planning and related services has seen little progress in the current year. The PIOB expects that this project is advanced in the coming year given the impact of these activities that may result in tax avoidance

Tax planning and related services

and the relevant concerns raised by many stakeholders and the society at large.

OTHER PUBLIC INTEREST ISSUES (NO PROJECT ONGOING)

External Experts

Need to consider the independence of experts outside the engagement team

External experts are explicitly excluded from the definition of Engagement Team both in the IAASB standards (ISQM1 as in ISA 220 (revised)) and in the proposed definition of the Code (which is expected to be aligned with ISQM1). As a result, these individuals are not subject to independence requirements of the Code.

Given the growing involvement of experts in areas such as estimates and technology, it is in the public interest to assess whether the nature of their work and contribution to the audit opinion requires further independence requirements, similar to other individuals that are part of the engagement team.

As this matter is out of the scope of the current IESBA project on Engagement Team definition and Group audits (see further comments above), the PIOB urges IESBA and IAASB to consider this issue in the Code and/or through a revision of ISA 620, *External experts*.

Audit Firms Business Model

Audit Firms' Business Model may be a barrier to auditor independence and Audit Quality

The audit firm business model can be seen as a barrier to independence, to the effective implementation of Professional Skepticism, and to audit quality.

The approach in the NAS and Fees projects introduces safeguards to address threats to independence, including express prohibitions of certain services, an explicit role of those charged with governance and transparency provisions for fees and fee dependency, but does not challenge the concept of multidisciplinary audit firms.

Recognizing that the business model is a complex issue and that ethical issues are just one aspect of it, ongoing coordination with the IAASB and other stakeholders is encouraged to continue to identify ways to address the topic from a holistic point of view.

