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**Sixty-ninth session**  
Agenda item 135  
**Pattern of conferences**

## **Pattern of conferences\***

### **Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions**

#### **I. Introduction**

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/69/120 and Corr.1). In addition, the Committee had before it for information the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2014 (A/69/32), which includes the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences in annex I. During its consideration of the report, the Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information and clarification, concluding with written responses received on 16 October 2014.

2. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, which was submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/251 and other relevant mandates, contains information on conference management issues as well as initiatives undertaken by the Secretariat to improve the quality of conference services provided to Member States. Additional statistical data supplementary to the report were also made available on the website of the Committee on Conferences.

#### **II. Meetings management**

##### **Utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities**

3. In his report, the Secretary-General states that the benchmark of 80 per cent for the utilization of Secretariat conference-servicing resources and facilities was exceeded at the four conference-servicing duty stations (New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi), reaching 82 per cent in 2013 and 84 per cent in 2012. Further detailed information and an analysis of utilization rates by duty station is presented in the

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\* Reissued for technical reasons on 15 January 2015.



report (A/69/120, paras. 10-22). The Advisory Committee recalls that, in comparison, the average utilization factor for the four duty stations stood at 85 per cent in both 2011 and 2010 (A/68/567, para. 3). The Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that the formula for calculating utilization rates was based on the number of meetings planned versus the actual number held. In this connection, the Committee on Conferences indicates in its report that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had worked closely with the secretariats and bureaux of the eight intergovernmental bodies whose utilization factor over the previous 10 years had fallen below the benchmark of 80 per cent, offering a number of suggestions to improve their use of conference services (A/69/32, para. 21).

**4. The Advisory Committee notes that the overall utilization rate for the four duty stations is approaching the 80 per cent benchmark, however, the Committee is of the view that the rate should be monitored closely considering the drop in utilization by 3 percentage points, from 85 per cent in 2011 to 82 per cent in 2013. The Committee welcomes the efforts made to date, but reiterates its concern over the rates of utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities (see A/68/567, para. 5).**

#### **Utilization of the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa**

5. The Advisory Committee specifically addresses the utilization of the Conference Centre of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in its recent report on progress in the construction of additional conference facilities at ECA (A/69/415, paras. 43-46). In the context of this report, the Committee was informed that ECA had calculated the occupancy rate on the basis of the number of conference rooms, whereas other duty stations used a methodology based on the number of planned versus actual meetings held. The methodology used by other duty stations has now been adopted by ECA and applied retroactively. Consequently, the ECA utilization rate for 2012, for example, now stands at 80.5 per cent instead of 62 per cent under the old methodology. **For budgetary purposes, the Committee is of the view that information concerning the utilization rates showing actual occupancy against existing full capacity for all Secretariat conference facilities should be provided to it in the context of future budget submissions.**

6. In its previous report, the Advisory Committee made observations and recommendations on the financial sustainability of the Centre. With regard to the break-even formula of a 50-50 balance between income generation and costs, the Committee recalls its recommendation to include indirect costs in this formula (A/68/567, para. 9) and regrets that the Secretary-General did not provide an update on the matter in his current report on the pattern of conferences. While the Secretariat provided a general explanation of this threshold in connection with the Committee's report on progress in the construction of additional conference facilities at ECA, it did not specify whether the 50-50 target was based on full cost recovery (see A/69/415, paras. 45-46). **The Committee requests that the Secretary-General provide to the General Assembly, at the time of its consideration of the present report, a clarification as to whether the 50 per cent break-even target is based on full cost recovery, including all direct and indirect costs.**

7. The Secretary-General explains that there has been an increase in partnerships with the Ethiopian tourism agency, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, major airlines and key tour operators, which would assist the Conference Centre in gradually becoming a more efficient and effective one-stop service provider. Furthermore, in 2014, with its closer partnerships with major airlines, branded hotels and selected tour operators, the Conference Centre will also begin to offer short package trips within Ethiopia and to neighbouring countries to boost its brand image (A/69/120, para. 29). In this connection, the Advisory Committee notes that written justifications concerning the use of the conference centre for private sector purposes have not been provided. **The Committee intends to revert to this matter in the context of future budget proposals relating to ECA.**

### III. Integrated global management of conference services

#### Conference management

8. The Secretary-General indicates that the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna have agreed to clearly delineate their responsibilities concerning conference management policies, operations and resource utilization (A/69/120, para. 31). The Advisory Committee recalls that this matter has been under review for a number of years. The Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that new Secretary-General's bulletins would recognize that the four conference management operations form part of the Secretariat's global conference-servicing capacity, which is funded through section 2 of the programme budget. It is indicated that Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi conference services managers would be accountable to their respective Directors General and to the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management. Specifically, under this shared responsibility: (a) the Under-Secretary-General would decide, in consultation with the Director General, on the allocation of resources made available under the Organization's programme budget, supervise their utilization and provide guidance to the division directors on all matters related to conference-servicing strategies, policies, methods of work, global capacity-planning, global workload-planning and placement; and (b) the Director General would supervise the operational activities of the divisions, including the implementation of policies, and provide executive direction and management to staff placed locally under his or her authority. Furthermore, while the conference-servicing entities will deliver services to local clients, they will also contribute to the global delivery of conference services, as coordinated by the Under-Secretary-General.

9. **The Advisory Committee has commented extensively on the importance it attaches to the authority and accountability of the Under-Secretary-General in the management of all the Organization's resources allocated for conference-servicing under section 2 of the programme budget (A/68/567, para. 10) and welcomes the successful conclusion of the process of defining the delineation of responsibilities.**

#### Integrated global management rule, formerly known as the "proximity rule"

10. The Advisory Committee previously provided its comments and observations on the application of the so-called proximity rule by the Department in the use of

resources. The “rule” is a description of the cumulative efforts by the four conference-servicing duty stations and regional commissions to achieve the most efficient servicing package for meetings held away from their designated headquarters, including by, inter alia, minimizing travel costs (A/68/567, para. 12). The Committee has previously stated that the use of this term was misleading and that the Secretary-General should consider renaming it appropriately (ibid., para. 13). In paragraph 33 of his most recent report, the Secretary-General indicates that the practice was now known as the “integrated global management rule”.

11. The Advisory Committee was informed that notional savings for New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2013 amounted to approximately \$1.3 million as a result of the workload-sharing concept under the integrated global management rule. **The Committee welcomes the efficiencies achieved under the rule.**

## **IV. Matters related to documentation and publications**

### **Digitization**

12. The Secretary-General notes that the Department of Public Information and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management continue to work jointly to increase online access to historical United Nations documents (A/69/120, para. 58). The Advisory Committee was informed that in connection with the work required for that purpose, 14 staff members of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management whose posts had been abolished in the 2014-2015 budget were currently working with the Dag Hammarskjöld Library on the digitization of documents. This was made possible through the provision of extrabudgetary resources. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that digitization involved several steps, including identifying, retrieving and preparing documents, scanning documents and creating metadata, such as titles, dates and subjects. The Committee was further informed that a reliable and comprehensive document inventory did not exist but that an estimated 17 million documents were in need of digitization, with an estimated 4 million considered to be important. In addition, the Committee learned that approximately 350,000 documents had been digitized since 1998, when the process commenced. The Committee was informed that the Library was currently assessing the options for accelerating the process, in response to a request by the Committee on Conferences in this respect. In this connection, the Advisory Committee notes that the Committee on Conferences has been provided with information on the volume of documents to be digitized, the criteria for their selection and the technology and expertise required (see A/69/32, para. 35).

13. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the joint effort to digitize United Nations documents and trusts that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, in collaboration with the Department of Public Information, will report on the resources designated for this exercise, including on any voluntary contributions received for that purpose. Furthermore, the Committee recalls its previous comments on the digitization process and looks forward to receiving an update on its status in the next report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (see also A/68/567, para. 16).**

14. The Advisory Committee stresses its previous comments concerning the need to improve the timeliness of document submission and issuance (see also A/68/567,

paras. 19-21). Information on document management and document submission rates for all duty stations is contained in paragraphs 44 to 57 of the report of the Secretary-General. The Committee trusts that efforts will continue to be made to ensure the timely publication of documents to allow Member States adequate time to prepare for scheduled meetings.

## V. Matters related to translation and interpretation

15. Matters related to translation and interpretation are addressed in the report of the Secretary-General (A/69/120, paras. 59-78) and the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/69/32, paras. 38-42).

### Resource limitations

16. Concerning the resources made available to the human rights treaty body system, the Advisory Committee notes that the General Assembly has recently approved the addition of 20 weeks of meetings to the human rights calendar. In paragraph 30 of its resolution 68/268, the Assembly decided to allocate a maximum of three official working languages for the work of the human rights treaty bodies, with the inclusion, on an exceptional basis, of a fourth official language when necessary to facilitate communication among the members, as determined by the committee concerned, taking into account that those measures would not constitute a precedent, given the special nature of the treaty bodies, and without prejudice to the right of each State party to interact with the treaty bodies in any of the six official languages of the United Nations. The Committee was informed upon enquiry that, following the adoption of the resolution, representatives of the Division of Conference Management of the United Nations Office at Geneva and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights met to determine its impact and agreed to propose a reduction of \$10 million in the resources dedicated to the servicing of the treaty bodies in Geneva in 2015.

17. With regard to the broader issue of resource availability in the Department, the Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that all cost-saving measures had been exhaustively explored following the budget reductions of \$63 million agreed to by the General Assembly in its resolution 68/246 and the reduction noted above with respect to the treaty bodies. The Committee notes that the Department's ability to meet the Organization's translation and interpretation needs is dependent on a number of interrelated factors, including the effective planning and availability of resources, the projection of workload and the anticipation of staffing levels.

18. **On a related subject, the Advisory Committee recalls its comments concerning the discontinuation of translations of written replies to the list of issues arising from the human rights treaty bodies. The Committee was informed, during its deliberations in the context of the second performance report on the programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013, that this change in practice had been communicated in 2012 in a note verbale advising that the Secretariat had dispensed with the practice (see A/68/656, para. 20). The Committee further recalls that the General Assembly endorsed the Committee's recommendation that the Assembly instruct the Secretary-General to reinstate the practice of translating written replies to the list of issues arising from the human rights bodies, with immediate effect (resolution 68/245 A, para. 1).**

19. **The Advisory Committee recalls its comments made in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 that, in connection with the provision of meetings and conference services, effective and efficient mandate delivery must always be the overriding factor in determining the Secretariat's resource requirements and overall staffing structure (A/68/7, chap. I, para. 19). Furthermore, in the context of its report on the programme budget implications of draft resolution A/68/L.37 on strengthening and enhancing the effective functioning of the human rights treaty body system, the Committee noted that any potential savings were based on untested assumptions, and in that regard recommended that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to reflect any variations in resource requirements and workload statistics in the performance reports (A/68/807, para. 16). The Committee is of the view that this information should be taken into account when determining resource requirements for future budget proposals so as to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to conference-servicing requirements.**

20. Another important role for the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management is safeguarding the multilingual nature of the Organization, which requires adequate resources. In this regard, the Advisory Committee recalls its comment in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2014-2015 that the General Assembly has emphasized in various resolutions the importance of ensuring that the texts of all new public United Nations documents in all six official languages, information materials and all older United Nations documents be made available through the United Nations website and be accessible to Member States without delay (A/68/7, chap. II, para. VII.28).

**21. On a related matter, the Advisory Committee enquired about the roles of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Department of Public Information within the United Nations system with regard to multilingualism but did not receive a detailed response. The Committee intends to revert to the matter in the context of the next proposed programme budget.**

**22. The Advisory Committee is of the view that the principle of multilingualism must not be compromised by attempts to achieve savings through restrictions that have an impact on the translation of documents into all official languages and that maintaining the quality of translations is paramount. The Committee intends to keep the matter under close review, in particular in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2016-2017.**

#### **Quality of contractual services**

23. Concerning departmental efforts to produce high-quality documents in all official languages, the Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that spot-checks of contractual translations were one of the means of quality control and were initiated in 2008 pursuant to recommendations of the Board of Auditors (A/63/5 (Vol. I), chap. II, paras. 10 (ee) and 297). Upon further enquiry, the Committee was informed that in the case of short documents, the full text is reviewed, and for longer documents, parts of the text are checked. If the partial check indicates the need for a more in-depth review, the full text is then checked. A minimum of 20 valid quality-control checks are performed per year, using a standardized evaluation form with

the name of the company or freelance translator added after the evaluation is completed to ensure anonymity. Furthermore, individual contractors are tested before their inclusion in the relevant rosters, and each translation service has a dedicated quality-control focal point, with senior revisers at the P-5 level rotating through that function. The Committee was also informed that the implementation of the gText computer-assisted translation system during the biennium 2014-2015 would improve the quality of output of external translators by giving them access to a single integrated system of translation tools, documents, terminology and information used by all United Nations language staff. **The Advisory Committee requests that comparative data with respect to the number of quality-control checks conducted and the total number of documents translated be provided in the context of the next report on the pattern of conferences.**

#### **Outreach efforts to identify language staff and succession planning**

24. During its review of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, the Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that there were significant shortfalls in translation capacity, owing in part to a high vacancy rate with respect to French translation, mainly at the P-4 level. The Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that the high vacancy rate in the French language services was being addressed through the introduction of special measures, including the use of contractual resources, which comprised approximately 50 per cent of the French translation workload in 2014.

25. The Advisory Committee was informed that, in view of high actual and forecast vacancy rates within this language group, the Department continued to pursue its outreach programme and other initiatives to identify suitable candidates for French translation, given the small number of candidates who pass the competitive language examination. Furthermore, a number of candidates who had passed the examination had rejected offers of employment in New York, preferring to wait for openings in Geneva or Vienna.

26. Meanwhile, a projected 114, or 13 per cent, of 887 professional-level language staff across all language groups are forecast to retire between 1 July 2014 and 31 December 2017. Outreach efforts with a focus on career and succession planning covering the six official languages are described in the Secretary-General's report and include approaches to the European Union/pan-African programme and the use of language rosters (A/69/120, paras. 63-69). The Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that the Department's university outreach programme comprised 22 universities located in countries where one of the six official languages is spoken, that had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Organization.

**27. The Advisory Committee recalls its previous comments on outreach initiatives and succession planning (A/68/567, para. 28). While the Committee recognizes the efforts undertaken so far, it also believes that succession planning merits the development of a comprehensive, action-oriented, innovative and long-term plan, taking into consideration the various factors influencing current and future vacancies. Furthermore, the Committee recalls that it has previously encouraged the Secretary-General to expand the geographic dimensions of the outreach programme (see A/68/7, chap. II, para. I.120). The Committee is of the view that the programme should be expanded and in this context that consideration should be given to approaching universities, located in all**

**Member States, that offer high-quality professional language programmes in any of the six official United Nations languages. Furthermore, to ensure a streamlined approach, the Committee recommends that sufficient capacity be provided within the Department for the coordination of outreach activities.**

## **VI. PaperSmart concept**

28. The Advisory Committee notes that the Committee on Conferences was provided with updated information on the PaperSmart initiative, including print-on-demand facilities and details of the staffing and workload of the Verbatim Reporting Service (A/69/32, para. 37). Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that PaperSmart services continued to be provided as an additional, but not obligatory, meeting service to Member States. In this connection, the Secretary-General explains that digital recordings are successfully utilized for some entities and that their future use would be discussed by the entities concerned (A/69/120, paras. 55-56). The Committee will keep this matter under review and looks forward to future updates in this respect.

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