



# General Assembly

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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/74/121](#)). In addition, the Committee had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2019 ([A/74/32](#)), 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 11 October 2019.

2. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [73/270](#) and other relevant mandates. The report contains information on matters relating to meetings management and documents management in 2018, together with cost-efficiency initiatives and cross-cutting issues. **The Advisory Committee notes that there are no immediate financial implications resulting from the report.**

3. The Advisory Committee recalls that, with regard to the proposed programme budget for 2020, the Committee had made a number of comments and recommendations regarding conference management under section 2, General Assembly and Economic and Social Council affairs and conference management, including on multilingualism and the equal treatment of official languages, documentation and related services, the workload and productivity of the translation services, geographical distribution in the translation services, accessibility of persons with disabilities and non-calendar events and meetings (see [A/74/7](#), paras. I.38 to I.72).



## II. Conference management strategy

4. The Advisory Committee recalls that in paragraph 5 of his report on the pattern of conferences ([A/73/93](#)), the Secretary-General indicated that a harmonized conference management strategy had been achieved by means of the mandated delineation of responsibilities among the four duty stations. In paragraph 36 of its resolution [73/270](#), the General Assembly noted the completion of the internal reviews concerning accountability mechanisms and the clear delineation of responsibility between the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna for conference management policies, operations and resource utilization. In the resolution, the Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to report to it on the outcome of the internal reviews at its seventy-fourth session and in that regard recalled, *inter alia*, paragraph 36 of its resolution [72/19](#). **The Advisory Committee notes the decentralized model used for conference services and trusts that in terms of the delegation of authority, clear indicators of accountability will be established in a framework of key performance indicators for the efficient use of resources and effective implementation of mandates. The Committee further notes that the report does not contain the outcome of the internal reviews as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution [72/19](#) and trusts that this information will be contained in the next report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences.**

5. In terms of the integrated global management rule, the Secretary-General indicates that in 2018 the application of the rule resulted in notional savings of \$819,424, reflecting an increase of 78 per cent over 2017 ([A/74/121](#), figure V). He also indicates that the additional workload of coordinating and servicing meetings held away from established headquarters is not reflected as an administrative cost to the United Nations (*ibid.*, para. 16).

## III. Meetings and documents management

6. The Secretary-General indicates that the General Assembly, in its resolution 3491 (XXX), decided that the cycle of meetings and conferences should coincide with the budgetary period and that the Assembly subsequently adopted resolution [72/266 A](#), in which it approved the change from a biennial to an annual budget period on a trial basis, beginning with the programme budget for 2020. He indicates that, in the light of this change, the Committee on Conferences, in accordance with its mandate, may wish to consider requesting the Secretary-General to prepare, for the time being or at least during the period of the trial, draft annual calendars of conferences and meetings, in line with the new budget cycle, and to consider approving, in 2019, a calendar only for 2020 ([A/74/121](#), para. 8).

### Innovations in meetings and documents management

7. In his report, the Secretary-General provides information relating to a number of innovations in meetings management ([A/74/121](#), paras. 19–28) and documents management (*ibid.*, paras. 50–53). Upon request, the Advisory Committee was provided with a comprehensive list of pilot projects currently under way in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and notes the continued work on an extensive number of innovations and pilot initiatives, including gText and gDoc 2.0 projects, an online training tool for language staff and a new accessible and interactive format for electronic publications. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the initiatives of the Department and trusts that the**

**information relating to the pilot projects will be provided to the General Assembly at the time of its consideration of the report of the Secretary-General.**

#### **Documents processing**

8. Upon request, the Advisory Committee was provided with detailed information for 2019, with respect to the cost parameters for the production of United Nations documents and for interpretation into the six official languages, including for meeting services (see annex).

#### **Nairobi conference centre**

9. The Advisory Committee recalls the information relating to the deteriorating conditions of the Nairobi conference centre and the limited capacity to provide conference services as well as the status of the conference facility, the conditions and the need for an upgrade of the centre, as identified by the Secretary-General in his report on the strategic capital review ([A/70/697](#)). The Committee notes that the Secretary-General has submitted to the General Assembly his report on addressing the deteriorating conditions and limited capacity of the conference service facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi ([A/74/471](#)) and will make related comments and observations in its related report.

#### **Non-calendar meetings**

10. In paragraph 13 of his report, the Secretary-General indicates that requests for the use of United Nations premises for non-calendar meetings and side events increased in New York, Geneva and Vienna, with the total number of meetings held at the four duty stations in 2018 increasing by 3 per cent compared with 2017, from 33,975 to 34,962 meetings ([A/74/121](#), figure II). He indicates that, compared with 2013, the number of non-calendar meetings increased by 40 per cent and accounted for 75 per cent of all meetings in New York and Geneva in 2018 and that the increase placed heavy constraints on the resources allocated to servicing mandated calendar meetings. He further indicates that the implementation of a cost-recovery mechanism for meetings not related to the intergovernmental process in New York will be initiated (*ibid.*, para. 71). The Advisory Committee was informed that no provision existed under the regular budget for such meetings and further recalls its related observations and comments regarding a cost recovery mechanism for cultural activities, meetings and events not related to the intergovernmental process (see [A/74/7](#), para. I.70, and [A/73/458](#), paras. 10–15). **The Advisory Committee trusts that information relating to the cost recovery mechanism will be provided to the General Assembly at the time of its consideration of the report of the Secretary-General.**

11. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that, in Geneva, a self-service tool was implemented to automatically estimate the resource and financial implications of conference services and of the technical and support services arranged for extrabudgetary meetings and special events. The tool was successfully piloted with the Office for Disarmament Affairs and will be introduced to permanent missions ([A/74/121](#), para. 24). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the web-based tool enabled users to generate cost estimates on a self-service basis, explore multiple financial scenarios by selecting any desired combination of services and immediately see the projected cost for prospective events at the Palais des Nations. Its purpose was to give clients improved clarity and control over the planning process and to reduce and simplify planning and communication efforts for both clients of and entities servicing the United Nations Office at Geneva.

## IV. Staffing

12. In paragraphs 55 to 60 of his report, the Secretary-General describes a number of measures introduced in 2018 regarding the recruitment of language professionals and the reduction of vacancies. These include remote recruitment testing, expanded outreach to potential recruits, training of potential recruits through internships and traineeships, the pilot of a remote tool for testing interpreters and the use of social media. In paragraph 54 and table 2 of his report, the Secretary-General provides the vacancy rates by duty station in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2018. **The Advisory Committee notes the status of the vacancies and encourages the Secretary-General to ensure that vacant posts be filled expeditiously.**

### Outreach activities and the internship programme

#### *Gap of qualified candidates*

13. In terms of outreach activities, the Advisory Committee recalls that, in its resolution [71/262](#), the General Assembly referred to “the wide gap of qualified candidates from Africa and from the Latin American and Caribbean region”. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to make further concerted efforts to promote outreach programmes, such as traineeships and internships, and to introduce innovative methods to increase awareness of the programmes, including through partnerships with Member States, relevant international organizations and language institutions in all regions, in particular to close the wide gap of qualified candidates from Africa and from the Latin American and Caribbean region, and to report thereon to the Assembly at its seventy-second session. The Assembly subsequently reiterated its request to the Secretary-General in paragraph 116 of its resolution [73/270](#).

#### *Measures*

14. The Advisory Committee was informed that the Department had taken a number of measures, including: (a) improving outreach activities and paying special attention to ensuring that information about the United Nations language competitive examinations, the special requirements of United Nations language jobs and professional orientation were equally available to interested audiences in all geographic regions, by means of various communications tools; (b) introducing remote practicums for students of translation and interpretation that were equally accessible to applicants in all regions of the world, as well as to persons with disabilities; (c) introducing remote language competitive examinations that were also equally accessible to applicants in all regions of the world, as well as to persons with disabilities; and (d) modifying recruitment criteria for French and Spanish translation language competitive examinations by replacing a third language requirement with a substantive training requirement (such as economic, legal or translation school training) in order to expand the pool of qualified candidates from the less well-represented regions.

#### *Internship programme*

15. With regard to the internship programme of the Department, the Secretary-General indicates in paragraph 58 of his report that the Secretariat hosted 85 language interns in 2018, who together spent 5,520 days in the language services, receiving 4,630 hours of staff supervision in the form of feedback, coaching, individual training on diverse topics and career guidance. Most of the interns (76) came from one of the partner universities of the Department. The language services also held 340 training and informational sessions during the year under the university outreach programme. As part of the review of its collaborative arrangements with partner universities, the

Department increased the number of universities with remote practicum agreements to eight in 2018.

16. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was provided with information regarding the geographical origins of language interns over the past five years and notes the concentration of interns from a limited number of countries. The Committee was further informed that all interns had been retained in accordance with the administrative instruction governing the United Nations internship programme (ST/AI/2014/1) and through the online recruitment platform Inspira. **The Advisory Committee notes the efforts made as regards the internship programme and remote practicum agreements with partner universities and encourages the Department to make further efforts as regards the geographical diversity of the language interns.**

#### *Outreach to universities*

17. In terms of outreach to universities, the Advisory Committee was provided with additional information regarding the universities that had signed a memorandum of understanding with the Department as well as the applicable criteria. The Committee was further informed that the Department was in the process of implementing memorandums of understanding with four African universities and one Latin American university and that other more specific types of agreements were being implemented with another three Latin American universities and one Caribbean university.

18. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that the Pan-African Masters Consortium project, which is aimed at increasing access to high-quality tertiary education in Africa through its internationally aligned master's degrees in interpretation and translation at five universities, has received a no-cost extension until November 2019 (A/74/121, para. 60). In terms of the future, the Advisory Committee was informed that the final evaluation was intended to be forward-looking, in order to effectively capture lessons learned and provide information on the nature, extent and, where possible, the impact of the project for implementing partners, beneficiaries and other stakeholders. The emphasis of the evaluation was on learning lessons that would guide future planning, generate evidence of organizational learning and accountability and make recommendations that could inform the design of a revised programme geared to strengthen overall management of such projects.

19. **The Advisory Committee notes the efforts made by the Department in terms of outreach activities to meet future staffing challenges and, in particular, to address the gap of qualified candidates from Africa and from the Latin American and Caribbean region through memorandums of understanding with universities.**

20. **The Advisory Committee acknowledges the efforts made to date and encourages the Department to make further efforts, including signing memorandums of understanding with more universities with a view to increasing the geographical diversity of language staff.**

#### **Remote testing**

21. In paragraphs 55 and 56 of his report, the Secretary-General provides information regarding remote testing for the recruitment of language professionals, including that seven competitive examinations were concluded in 2018, resulting in 143 professionals being rostered for subsequent employment as staff. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was provided with information relating to the geographic distribution of language staff by nationality in all duty stations. The Committee was

informed that combined language competitive examinations were organized regularly to fill rosters with candidates that could potentially work for any of the four duty stations of the Department and at the regional commissions. Given the similarity of the skills and qualifications required for editors, translators, *précis*-writers and verbatim reporters, the practice of conducting separate exams had been discontinued and replaced by a new combined examination to test the language skills of candidates. Successful candidates could then be offered posts in any of the professions tested in the combined examination (see para. 22 below).

22. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that in terms of the three fully remote combined examinations for translators, editors, verbatim reporters and copy preparers, proofreaders and production editors, the accessibility of remote testing attracted record numbers of applicants, especially from less well-represented regions and yielded sufficient candidates to cover the anticipated staffing needs over the next three years and address the vacancy rate in the French Translation Service in particular. In addition, the combined nature of the examinations has drastically reduced the number of examinations that need to be held, significantly increasing the efficiency of the recruitment process and enabling the language services to identify language professionals suitable for temporary freelance or contractual work (*ibid.*, para. 55). The Advisory Committee was informed that the new format of the combined examinations offered the Organization a more flexible workforce that could handle different types of work and provided candidates with greater career opportunities in any of the above-mentioned professions. The goal was to conduct language competitive examinations every 3 to 4 years before rosters were depleted. The Committee was further informed that, as a result of the Department's outreach campaigns and the availability of remote examinations, a larger number of candidates were applying to the combined examinations and the time invested in organizing and marking the exams had decreased.

23. In paragraph 56 of the report, the Secretary-General indicates that the pilot of a remote tool for testing interpreters in 2018 identified certain technical issues that are currently being addressed, with a view to trialing the tool in the competitive examination for French interpreters in 2020, provided it offers the same quality testing environment as that achieved at on-site test centres. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the tool had been used for a number of years in human resources management and that the Department had conducted trials for its use by freelance interpreters. The four duty stations reviewed the trial results and concluded that technical issues would need to be addressed prior to its use for competitive examinations. The Committee was informed that the technical issues were related to the Internet and equipment set-up, mostly experienced by candidates, and that all issues were expected to be resolved during the mock test phase.

**24. The Advisory Committee welcomes the further development and use of remote testing as a recruitment tool and trusts that the use of this testing mechanism will prove instrumental in increasing the geographical diversity of the language staff. The Committee also recalls its comments and recommendations under the proposed programme budget for 2020 regarding multilingualism and the equal treatment of official languages, the workload of the translation services and the geographical distribution in the translation services (A/74/7, paras. I.48, I.49, I.51 and I.56).**

## V. Facilities and accessibility

25. In paragraphs 61 to 63 of his report, the Secretary-General provides an overview of activities and initiatives related to the accessibility of persons with disabilities to

conference services and facilities. The Secretary-General indicates that improvements in accessibility services continued to be made in conference services and across locations. **The Advisory Committee continues to acknowledge the efforts of the Department regarding accessibility and recalls its previous comments and recommendations on accessibility (see also [A/73/458](#), paras. 20–21, and [A/74/7](#), paras. I.67–I.68).**

## **VI. Conclusion**

26. **Subject to its comments and recommendations in the paragraphs above, the Advisory Committee recommends that the General Assembly take note of the report of the Secretary-General.**

## Annex

### Cost parameters related to documentation and meeting services in 2019

#### A. Production of one United Nations document

(United States dollars)

	<i>New York</i>		<i>Geneva</i>		<i>Vienna</i>		<i>Nairobi</i>	
	<i>8,500 words, 26 pages</i>	<i>10,700 words, 32 pages</i>	<i>8,500 words, 26 pages</i>	<i>10,700 words, 32 pages</i>	<i>8,500 words, 26 pages</i>	<i>10,700 words, 32 pages</i>	<i>8,500 words, 26 pages</i>	<i>10,700 words, 32 pages</i>
Cost of one document <sup>a</sup>	27 200	34 100	28 200	35 400	27 000	33 900	25 300	31 900

<sup>a</sup> The cost of processing one document includes costs related to translation, revision, text-processing and editing, as well as printing and distribution.

#### B. Meeting services for up to two days

(United States dollars)

	<i>New York</i>	<i>Geneva</i>	<i>Vienna</i>	<i>Nairobi</i>
Cost of one meeting/day/six official languages <sup>a</sup>	11 900	12 200	12 600	18 300

<sup>a</sup> Total cost for one meeting/day covering the six United Nations official languages.

#### C. Meeting services for more than two days

(United States dollars)

	<i>New York</i>	<i>Geneva</i>	<i>Vienna</i>	<i>Nairobi</i>
Cost of one meeting/day/six official languages <sup>a</sup>	16 800	17 200	17 400	27 800

<sup>a</sup> Total cost for one meeting/day covering the six United Nations official languages.