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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/77/91](#)). In addition, the Committee had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2022 ([A/77/32](#)), which includes the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences in annex I to that report. During its consideration of the report, the Committee received additional information and clarification, concluding with written responses dated 7 October 2022.

2. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [76/237](#) and other relevant mandates. The report provides information on procedures and activities relating to the pattern of conferences in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2021, in the context of the continued difficulties arising from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. As indicated by the Secretary-General, the report also highlights a range of lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic from a conference management perspective. Those lessons, together with a continued focus on client satisfaction, pave the way for achieving optimum utilization of conference facilities and services in line with the expectations of Member States ([A/77/91](#), paras. 1–4).

II. Meetings management

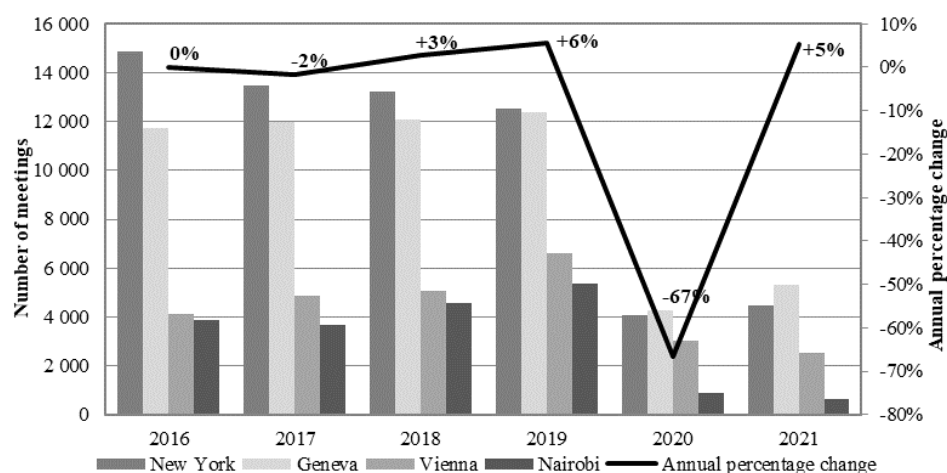
3. In his report, the Secretary-General explains the continued impact of the pandemic-related restrictions on meetings management, which caused a large number of meetings to be cancelled or postponed at all four duty stations in 2021. While still well below the pre-pandemic levels at all duty stations, the number of meetings witnessed a 5 per cent year-on-year increase in 2021, as the total global number of meetings held went from 12,266 in 2020 to 12,924 in 2021. This information is reflected in table 1 and figure I (*ibid.*, paras. 5–6, table 1 and figure I).



Table 1
Number of meetings held, global totals, 2016–2021

Number of meetings	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Global total	34 604	33 975	34 962	36 892	12 266	12 924

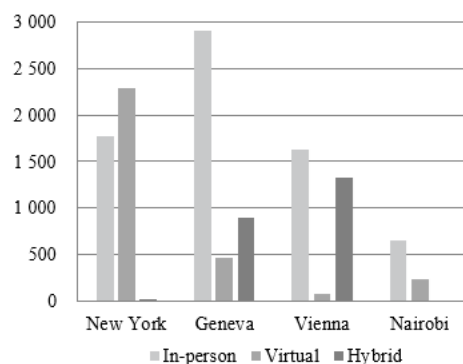
Figure I
Meetings workload at the four main conference-servicing duty stations, 2016–2021



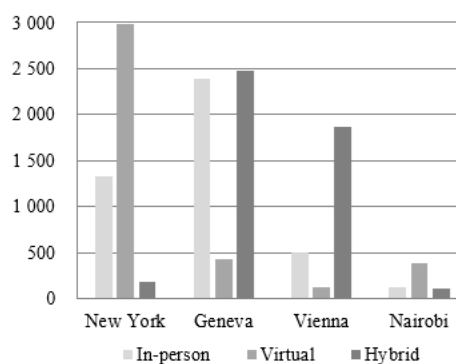
4. The Secretary-General further provides information on the number of in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings held in each duty station in 2020 and 2021. The information shows that the proportion of virtual meetings increased notably in New York, whereas the proportion of hybrid meetings rose significantly in Geneva and Vienna. The information provided also indicates that meetings supported with interpretation increased by 70 per cent in 2021 compared with 2020, while the proportion of meetings arranged without interpretation fell by 13 per cent over the same period (*ibid.*, para. 10 and figure II).

Figure II
Formats of meetings held at the four main conference-servicing duty stations, 2020 and 2021

A. 2020



B. 2021



The Advisory Committee notes that the statistics determining the types of meetings seem to be based on assumptions and criteria that are not consistently applied across the four

duty stations. The Committee makes related observations and recommendations in the context of its report on the proposed programme budget for 2023 (see [A/77/7](#), para. I.78).

5. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that there is no definition of virtual and hybrid meetings agreed upon by the General Assembly. Virtual and hybrid modalities are used in the context of business continuity. The Committee was also provided with the planning assumptions for virtual and hybrid meetings, which are established by the individual entities in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management for operational purposes, as reflected in table 2. Normally, the meeting format, whether virtual or hybrid, is determined at all four duty stations by the needs expressed by the meeting organizers when rooms are booked. In Vienna, in the absence of an early decision on the meeting format and to ensure adequate capacity, planning assumes a hybrid format, which can be altered if a decision is made to follow a fully in-person or fully virtual format.

Table 2

Planning assumptions for virtual and hybrid meetings

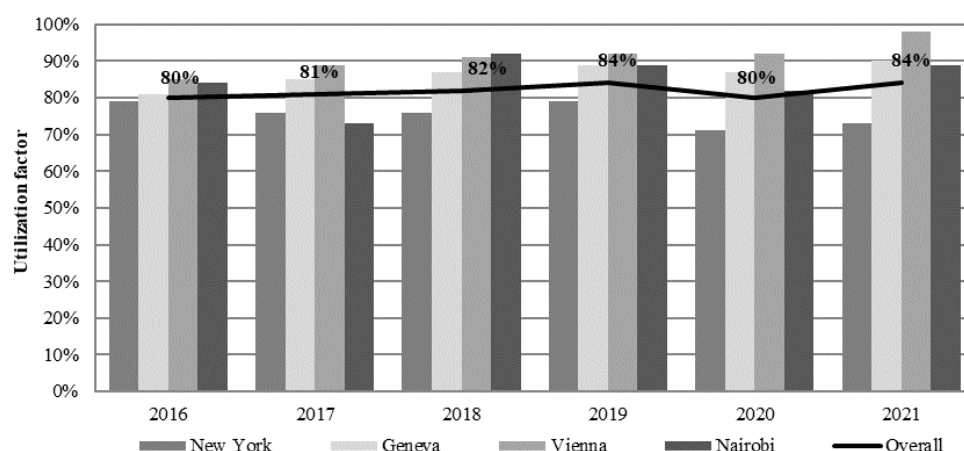
<i>Entity</i>	<i>Virtual</i>	<i>Hybrid</i>
Meetings and Publishing Division, New York	A virtual meeting has all its participants connected from remote locations, from an office or from home	A hybrid meeting has some participants seated in the conference room, ideally where the interpreters are also in the booths, while other participants connect remotely
Central Planning and Coordination Division, New York	A meeting that takes place on a virtual platform, with no physical participation on United Nations premises. When submitting a request, the option of “virtual room” is to be selected in gMeets	A meeting with a servicing secretariat and some of the participants are physically present in the conference room(s) on United Nations premises, while other participants attend the meeting remotely through the virtual platform
Division of Conference Management, Geneva	Participation is fully remote and connected to the online platform. Services are also provided fully remotely (e.g., interpreters in dispersed mode)	A mix of in-person and remote participation; a meeting is also labelled hybrid even if all participants are connected to the platform but the meeting chair and/or interpreters are working from within a conference room
Conference Management Service, Vienna	A virtual meeting is a meeting organized without any in-person component, i.e., all participants are joining online. Interpretation (of up to two hours by one team) can be provided from a hub at the duty station or remotely from another location	A hybrid meeting is a meeting organized in person with an unlimited number of online interventions. Interpretation is limited to two hours. In Vienna, interpreters service hybrid meetings from an on-site hub
Division of Conference Services, Nairobi	A meeting is virtual when the secretariat, the interpreters and the participants all work from their individual computers connected to a remote interpretation platform	Any United Nations meeting allowing delegates in-person and remote participation (the latter through remote interpretation platforms) is a hybrid meeting

6. As regards the increase in the conference-servicing workload in 2021 compared with 2020 (A/77/91, para. 10), upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that in New York, if compared to in-person servicing arrangements, the use of virtual and hybrid modalities had led to a reduction in the number of hours and number of assignments for each team, but had increased the overall workload involved in covering the same number of meetings, owing to additional tasks that were not required for in-person meetings before the pandemic. As the United Nations Office at Geneva progressively updated its conference rooms over the course of 2020 and 2021, it became possible to host more meetings in a hybrid format. As a result, Geneva saw a significant increase in the number of meetings held in 2021 (5,298) compared with 2020 (4,274). As for Vienna, in 2021, some in-person participation of delegates became possible as COVID-19 restrictions were gradually eased. The conference-servicing workload for meetings assistants and technicians doubled in order to accommodate concurrent in-room and online requests, requiring the simultaneous execution of disparate tasks that were not previously required. In Nairobi, only in-person meetings were conducted before the pandemic. When the compound in Nairobi was closed to in-person meetings as a result of the pandemic, the office moved to service only virtual meetings.

7. As regards the utilization of conference-servicing resources by United Nations organs, the Secretary-General, in his report, indicates that all four duty stations continued efforts to optimize the interpretation utilization rate in accordance with the relevant provisions in resolutions of the General Assembly. The overall utilization rate in 2021 was 84 per cent, compared with 80 per cent in 2020, as reflected in figure III. The report also includes information on the provision of interpretation services to bodies entitled to meet “as required”; to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States; and to meetings held away from established headquarters (*ibid.*, paras. 13–17 and figures III–VI).

Figure III

Interpretation utilization factor of all calendar bodies, 2016–2021



8. In the report, the Secretary-General explains that the servicing of hybrid and virtual meetings poses technical, logistical and capacity challenges and has caused health-related issues. In June 2021, the Division of Health-Care Management and Occupational Safety and Health indicated, in its assessment of workplace risks occasioned by the pandemic, that interpreting in dispersed (from home) mode posed an evident health hazard. The risk assessment outlined steps that should be taken to improve sound quality and protect interpreters' health and well-being. Accordingly, the reduced interpretation workload implemented at the onset of the pandemic was

maintained in 2021 as a mitigating measure. Despite efforts to raise awareness of the importance of having the recommended equipment and connectivity for virtual and hybrid meetings, poor sound quality and Internet connectivity problems persisted, placing an additional cognitive load on interpreters (*ibid.*, para. 10).

9. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, to protect the health and well-being of interpreters, the weekly workload has been reduced to five assignments of two hours for virtual meetings serviced in New York by remote simultaneous interpretation. Interpretation teams for three-hour hybrid meetings with more than 30 minutes of active remote participation are enlarged by one additional interpreter per language. Going forward, the provision of virtual and hybrid meetings with interpretation would require an intergovernmental mandate, which would include, among others, the mandatory use of the required appropriate equipment; the use of a high-quality Internet connection; and compliance with onboarding protocols and authentication procedures to obtain clearance to participate remotely. In Geneva, the three-hour meeting duration was maintained, when there were less than 30 minutes of active remote participation, but the length of meetings with unlimited remote participation was reduced from three to two hours. In Vienna, the same approach adopted by the Department was applied. In Nairobi, the duration and the capacity of the virtual and hybrid sessions have been modified to diminish colleagues' exposure to poor sound quality during virtual and hybrid meetings. New technical equipment was also bought and recommended, both for interpreters and delegates (e.g., surge-limiting headphones, stand-alone microphones), so as to improve the sound quality during virtual and hybrid meetings.

10. The Secretary-General mentions, in his report, that in addition to analysing the impact of COVID-19 on conference service provision and on the needs and expectations of clients beyond the immediate business continuity measures, enhancements were made to the conference management systems supported by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. The report enumerates the efforts to apply innovations in meetings services in 2021, including the project to integrate conference and event management applications with Inspira and Umoja Extension 2 (known as CEM-UE2-Inspira) in order to enhance language capacity planning, rostering, recruitment and performance management; to facilitate the administration of short-term and contractual capacity and the processing of payments; and to efficiently recover the costs of conference services delivered for extrabudgetary clients (*ibid.*, paras. 18–23). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the integration of the meeting participant management system (Indico.UN) with Umoja was implemented for the synchronization of location and event details. The synchronization of key details associated with events is expected to improve efficiency through the elimination of duplicate data entry, the improvement of data quality and the facilitation of financial reporting associated with events. The integration includes the transmission of location (country and city) information from Umoja to the system, thereby ensuring standardization and consistency in associated recording and reporting.

III. Documents management

11. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that the overall compliance by author departments with the deadlines for submitting slotted documents for processing decreased from 92 per cent in 2020 to 91 per cent in 2021. During the year, across the four duty stations, 98 per cent of documents (2,965 of a total of 3,035) submitted on time and within word limits were processed in a timely manner, compared with 93 per cent in 2020. The overall compliance with issuance deadlines rose from 90 per cent in 2020 to 92 per cent in 2021. Specifically, year on year, timely issuance increased from 85 to 94 per cent in New York and from 91 to 93 per cent in

Vienna, but declined slightly from 95 to 93 per cent in Geneva, owing to a higher volume of documents submitted late. Timely issuance in Nairobi improved over the same period, from 77 to 79 per cent, but remained comparatively low, largely owing to departmental corrections being received while documents were in process and to the vacancy rate of 33 per cent experienced by some language units for most of the year. The proportion of documents submitted for processing within agreed word limits slightly increased from 92 per cent in 2020 to 93 per cent in 2021. As for the number of words, the total number submitted globally for translation increased to over 219 million in 2021, from 216 million in 2020, representing a 1 per cent year-on-year increase (ibid., paras. 25–32, and figures VII–XI).

12. The throughput productivity of the translation services, or the total number of words processed divided by the staff days spent translating them, continued to increase in 2021 across duty stations, except in New York. The report of the Secretary-General report includes information on productivity for the past five years (2017–2021) and he explains that, owing to further refinement of the methodology applicable to New York, unlike previous years, the 2021 figures do not include the additional workload generated by parallel processing, which is the practice of simultaneously editing and translating documents in order to minimize processing time. Parallel processing is used in New York because of time pressure and limited editorial capacity. If editorial changes were included, throughput productivity for New York in 2021 would be 7.4 pages per staff member per day, rather than the currently recorded 6.1 pages. For 2022, the Department will review the gData methodology utilized for reporting translation throughput productivity to provide the Member States with an even more granular measure of the efficiency of its translation operations (ibid., para. 33 and table 2).

13. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the ideal and most cost-efficient workflow for document processing is linear processing, which starts with editors editing the original, checking references and consulting submitters, as needed, followed by translators translating the edited original. This ensures that translators start working with the final version of the document, without having to revert to the same job once it is edited to reflect the changes in all target languages; unlike parallel processing, which reduces throughput productivity as it creates rework. For example, a translator may have translated a sentence based on the original, but then needs to change the translation based on the edited text. Although this is an inefficiency, it ensures timely issuance of documentation and full capacity utilization of the internal staffing, as translators are advancing work and not waiting for editors to finish. The expectation is that the efforts to increase the editing capacity might facilitate linear processing to some extent and help the Department to deliver quality documents on time in the most cost-efficient manner, at least at certain times of the year. In the current throughput statistics, editorial corrections due to parallel processing are separated from translation to measure the impact of parallel processing and the outcome of the efforts of the Department to move to more linear processing. There is no plan to switch to parallel processing in the other duty stations, as it is a more expensive way of processing documentation. The Committee makes further comments on the productivity trends in its report on the proposed programme budget for 2023 (see [A/77/7](#), paras. I.57–I.59).

14. The Secretary-General indicates that, in 2021, a major effort was launched to clear the backlog of international treaties deposited with the United Nations that required translation. The backlog had been accumulating since 2015, mainly owing to capacity and budget constraints that existed at the time. As a result of this effort, the full backlog, amounting to approximately 1 million words of translation into English and 5 million words into French, was cleared by the end of March 2022 ([A/77/91](#), para. 29). **The Advisory Committee welcomes the efforts made to clear the backlog of international treaties.**

15. On the digitization and uploading of important older documents, the Secretary-General explains in his report the mass digitization and preservation project proposal prepared by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and presented by the Department of Global Communications to the Committee on Information at its forty-third session. The project would involve the preservation of 1 million documents that are currently in dire condition (*ibid.*, para. 38). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the project proposal presents the parameters for the immediate digitization and digital preservation of 1 million United Nations parliamentary and normative documents (1946–1993), which are available only in print and are in deteriorating condition. The proposal is accompanied by a business case that proposes outsourcing the digitization and basic metadata creation for these documents to be uploaded and further preserved in the United Nations Digital Library and the Official Document System. The business case includes the upgrading of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library’s digital platform to achieve digital preservation in line with current practices and international standards. It requests \$10 million to fund a five-year project to secure the retention of valuable United Nations knowledge and history. Along with the proposal, the Department of Global Communications also presented to the Committee on Information the business case and funding request to interested Member States and three foundations. At the same time and in response to General Assembly resolution [52/214](#), in which the Assembly requested the completion of the digitization of all important older United Nations documents in all six official languages, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library introduced an in-house digitization programme in 1998. As a result, 530,000 documents (some 6,600,000 pages) and 3,000 United Nations maps had been digitized as of October 2022, including most core Security Council documents and some documents of the General Assembly, Economic and Social Council and Trusteeship Council. **The Advisory Committee again welcomes the efforts to digitize historic and older documents of the Organization and trusts that detailed information on the financial aspects of the costs of the project will be included in the context of the next budget submission.**

IV. Staffing

16. Table 3 of the report of the Secretary-General report shows the vacancy rates in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2021. The Secretary-General indicates that the easing of the liquidity constraints in 2021 made it possible to fill some vacancies that had previously been subject to the hiring freeze. In Nairobi, there was a higher-than-usual vacancy rate in some language units, which was offset through short-term and contractual support. Despite the Department’s global outreach efforts, as in the past, the United Nations Office at Nairobi has experienced considerable difficulty in attracting and retaining staff, which presents a major challenge, given the small size of the teams (*ibid.*, para. 48 and table 3).

17. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that Nairobi had continued to review the roster and to advertise through Inspira. Some staff who accepted appointments to Nairobi would work until they gained experience and then transfer to other duty stations, closer to their home countries. To ensure that the programme of work is not adversely affected by these high vacancy rates, temporary staff have been recruited from the freelance market and other agencies, as both interpreters and translators, although they have not passed the United Nations competitive examination for language positions but have shown willingness to take the exams. Nairobi also works with individual and institutional contractors to address gaps in capacity. Those efforts will continue as the rosters are replenished through the language examinations. **The Advisory Committee notes the status of the vacancies in Nairobi and expects that efforts will be made to address the situation and that all vacant posts will be filled expeditiously (see also [A/76/506](#), para. 16).**

18. As for outreach activities, the Secretary-General explains in his report the efforts to reach out to language professionals, especially from Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. He indicates, however, that the amount of time spent on outreach activities by language staff decreased by 64 per cent in comparison with 2020. According to the Secretary-General, the figure for 2020 was unusually high, largely as a result of the temporary suspension of in-person meetings with interpretation, which allowed interpreters to spend much more time than usual on outreach. Similarly, on internships, the Secretary-General clarifies that the continued impact of the pandemic on travel and on the Organization's hosting capacity further limited the number of interns hosted by language services in 2021. Despite continued efforts aimed at recruiting interns from Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, the percentage of all interns hosted by United Nations language services from these regions fell to 28.6 per cent in 2021, from 32.4 per cent in 2020 and nearly 40 per cent in 2019 (A/77/91, paras. 51–54). **The Advisory Committee notes the efforts made by the Secretary-General in terms of outreach activities to meet future staffing challenges and encourages him to strengthen such efforts (see A/76/506, para. 17).** The Committee will make further comments on outreach activities in the context of its consideration of the reports of the Secretary-General on human resources management.

V. Facilities and accessibility

19. The Secretary-General refers to the projects affecting facilities in the four duty stations. The Secretary-General explains that while he was requested by the General Assembly, in its resolutions 69/274 A and 71/272 A, to assess the impact of the flexible workplace pilot on productivity, the pilot did not apply to language staff, who will continue to be accommodated in the current configurations for the immediate future (A/77/91, paras. 55–58). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in New York, the satellite buildings, including Albano and UNITAR, where the majority of language staff and the verbatim reporters are accommodated, were not included in the flexible workplace pilot. In the case of translators and revisers, the current open space configuration of the flexible workplace initiative is not suitable, given their need to focus on their work. However, as a consequence of the pandemic, most translators and revisers are availing of flexible work arrangements and successfully working from home for up to three days a week. Office space usage in Geneva is governed by the internal circular issued in 2022, which allocates eight workstations for every 10 staff in the newly constructed building and the renovated office spaces. The issue does not apply to Vienna and Nairobi, where the flexible workspace concept is being implemented in limited circumstances, owing to the architecture and design of both locations.

20. Concerning accessibility, the Secretary-General indicates in his report the efforts made to ensure accessibility at all four duty stations, which led, inter alia, to a significant increase in the number of meetings serviced with remote sign language interpretation in New York and Geneva, from 20 and 21 in 2020, respectively, to 55 and 62 in 2021, respectively. The Department collaborated with the Office of Information and Communications Technology to ensure that the teams were able to work remotely for both virtual and hybrid events (ibid., paras. 59–63).

VI. Enhancing integrated global management

21. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that on 3 February 2021, he promulgated a bulletin on the organization of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management (ST/SGB/2021/3), which replaced his previous bulletin

([ST/SGB/2005/9](#)) and defined the collective mandate of conference management operations at the four duty stations to provide conference services in a globally integrated manner. The planned new bulletins describing the organization of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi will be fully aligned with bulletin [ST/SGB/2021/3](#) in ensuring the integrated management of conference services financed centrally under section 2 of the programme budget. In October 2021, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management initiated a discussion and convened a meeting with the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi to align the delineation of responsibilities with the delegation of authority framework (*ibid.*, para. 64).

22. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, unlike the previous bulletin contained in [ST/SGB/2005/9](#) of 2 May 2005, the Secretary-General, in his bulletin [ST/SGB/2021/3](#), indicates that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management is responsible for providing and coordinating meetings and documentation services, not only for all intergovernmental organs and expert bodies meeting at Headquarters but also for conferences and other ad hoc and extraordinary meetings held under the auspices of the United Nations at other locations, under shared responsibility with the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. Further, it reflects the responsibility of the Department for providing policy guidance with regard to utilizing the apportioned parts of the global conference servicing resources that are under the authority of the Directors-General of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. The new bulletin explicitly requires the Department to formulate budget proposals through collaborative processes involving the conference management operations in the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, and to present the proposed integrated conference management budget to the expert and intergovernmental bodies. In terms of delineating the authority of the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors-General at the other three main conference-servicing duty stations, the new bulletin reflects the General Assembly mandate according to which the Department is responsible for the implementation of policy, the formulation of standards and guidelines, the oversight and coordination of United Nations conference services and the overall management of resources under the relevant budget section, while the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi remain responsible and accountable for day-to-day operational activities.

23. As for cost recovery, the Secretary-General states that a mechanism has been established at all four duty stations for meetings, conferences and events that are not integral to mandated intergovernmental processes and for which provision is not made in the programme budget. Cost parameters were developed and rates for conference services were established so that financial transactions associated with the recovery of costs related to extrabudgetary events can be performed and monitored in Umoja. An enhanced cost-recovery module to automate processes and workflows managed by conference services is also planned (*ibid.*, para. 65). The Committee makes further comments on cost recovery in its report on the proposed programme budget for 2023 (see [A/77/7](#), paras. I.70–I.73).

VII. Conclusion

24. According to paragraph 72 of the report, the Secretary-General recommends that the General Assembly take note of the report. **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.**