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Pattern of conferences

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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/76/80](#)). In addition, the Committee had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2021 ([A/76/32](#)), 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 Advisory Committee received additional information and clarification, concluding with written responses dated 10 November 2021.
2. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [75/244](#) and other relevant mandates. The report of the Secretary-General contains information on the delivery by the Secretariat on all its core mandates in conference services in 2020, despite the impact of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that there were no financial implications resulting from the report. **On the basis of the information provided by the Secretary-General, upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee notes that there are no financial implications resulting from the report.**
3. The Advisory Committee recalls that, with regard to the proposed programme budget for 2022, 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, the workload and productivity of the translation services, geographical distribution in the translation services, costs of in-person and virtual meetings, non-calendar events and meetings, cost recovery and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and best practices (see [A/76/7](#), chap. II, paras. I.42–I.82).

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4. The Advisory Committee notes paragraph 38 of the draft resolution contained in the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2021 (A/76/32, annex I) regarding 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, Vienna and Nairobi for conference management policies, operations and resource utilization. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/2021/3 on the organization of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had been issued in February 2021 and that the draft Secretary-General's bulletins on the organization of the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, including the provisions related to local and integrated global conference management, were all being further reviewed within the Secretariat. More recently, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management had engaged with the Directors-General of those duty stations, noting that the elements of the new Secretary-General's bulletins on the organization of their Offices should be fully aligned with Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/2021/3 in ensuring integrated management of the conference services financed centrally through the budget section relating to the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

5. The Advisory Committee recalls paragraph 4 of its report A/75/565 and expresses its concern that the report of the Secretary-General (A/76/80) does not contain information on the outcome of the internal reviews as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 72/19 and trusts, once again, that this information will be provided in the next report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences. The Committee reiterates its trust that in terms of the delegation of authority, clear indicators of accountability will be established in a framework with key performance indicators for the efficient use of resources and effective implementation of mandates.

II. Meetings management

6. In his report, the Secretary-General explains the impact of the pandemic-related restrictions, which resulted in a 67 per cent year-on-year reduction in the number of meetings held across the four duty stations, as the global number of meetings held fell from 36,892 in 2019 to 12,266 in 2020 (A/76/80, figure I). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was provided with information on the number of in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings held during the period from 1 January to 31 August 2021 in all four duty stations, as set out in the table below. The table shows that the majority of in-person meetings, except in New York, were held without interpretation. It also shows that the majority of the hybrid meetings held in all duty stations, except Vienna, were provided with interpretation services. With respect to virtual meetings, the percentage of meetings held with interpretation stood at 26 per cent of the total number of meetings held virtually in New York, 8 per cent in Geneva, 0 per cent in Vienna and 53 per cent in Nairobi. Upon enquiry, the Committee was further informed that the General Assembly had not adopted any resolution containing formal definitions of what constituted official meetings, official hybrid meetings and official virtual meetings. On the basis of practice and for statistical purposes, official meetings are defined as meetings convened by or on behalf of a calendar body, including informal meetings and informal consultations, regardless of format, in-person, hybrid or virtual, including those conducted remotely with the assistance received through the Office of Information and Communications Technology. **The Advisory Committee trusts that detailed information on the number of in-person, hybrid and virtual meetings held in 2021 and the lessons learned thereon will be provided in the context of the next report on the pattern of conferences.**

Number of meetings held in the four duty stations, 1 January–31 August 2021

	<i>With interpretation</i>	<i>Without interpretation</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>New York</i>			
In-person	418	132	550
Virtual	476	1 362	1 838
Hybrid	90	4	94
Total	984	1 498	2 482
<i>Geneva</i>			
In-person	67	528	595
Virtual	26	283	309
Hybrid	1 032	386	1 418
Total	1 125	1 197	2 322
<i>Vienna</i>			
In-person	10	290	300
Virtual	0	117	117
Hybrid	351	722	1 073
Total	361	1 129	1 490
<i>Nairobi</i>			
In-person	–	6	6
Virtual	147	133	280
Hybrid	36	–	36
Total	183	139	322

7. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that on the basis of the assessment of the workload associated with the meetings postponed from 2020 to 2021, there was a reasonable expectation that the associated costs, including to process the backlog requests for languages services of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, would require resources in 2021 beyond the appropriation for the budget year. Therefore, provision was made to process documentation and provide interpretation services during the 2021 period for all postponed 2020 meetings. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had raised commitments to address the backlog in the processing of documentation and the Controller's Office had approved its request to commit and carry over the remaining balance of \$27 million from 2020 to 2021. Of further note, while expenditures on internal reproduction and distribution supplies had decreased, the fixed cost component, such as the leasing of printers, could not be reduced. Owing to the cancellation and postponement of meetings, as well as the liquidity constraints in 2020, expenditures on travel of staff and temporary assistance for meetings had decreased from \$1,882,847 in 2019 to \$64,187 in 2020 across the four duty stations. Any unspent balance of the 2020 appropriation would be reported in the financial performance report. The Committee was informed, upon enquiry, in the context of its consideration of the financial performance report of the Secretary-General on the programme budget for 2020 (A/76/347), that the exact amount committed was \$27,553,370. The Committee will revert to this matter in its report on the financial performance report on the programme budget for 2020.

8. Regarding cost recovery, the Advisory Committee recalls paragraph 7 of its report [A/75/565](#) and notes that the report of the Secretary-General ([A/76/80](#)) does not include information on the cost recovery mechanisms in all four duty stations. **The Advisory Committee trusts, once again, that this information will be provided to the General Assembly at the time of its consideration of the report of the Secretary-General and will be included in the future reports of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences and his future programme budget proposals (see also [A/76/7](#), para. I.74).**

9. In his report, the Secretary-General explains that in order to provide the option of remote participation in all meetings and conferences, as a result of the physical distancing requirements, and to implement the related recommendation contained in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit ([JIU/REP/2018/6](#)), three commercially available platforms to provide for remote interpretation were tested across the Secretariat. This resulted in the procurement of licences to provide interpretation, which allowed, from June 2020 onward, for interpretation to be provided to in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings of Member States at all four duty stations ([A/76/80](#), para. 8).

10. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in New York, all three platforms had been successfully used, with improving performance, but not meeting all the expectations of participants and service providers. In Geneva, the performance of the platforms was still poor and sound quality remained a problem. The platforms were not compliant with the standards of the International Organization for Standardization and sound issues were exacerbated when remote participants did not use the required equipment and/or joined from noisy locations and/or had poor Internet connectivity. In Vienna, there had been some improvement; however, it was unclear whether that could be attributed to the platforms themselves or the behaviour of the participants. In Nairobi, the performance of the platforms used for virtual and hybrid meetings had not improved during the past year, apart from some practical changes and improvements in the platforms' interfaces and options. All three platforms had been continuously implementing fixes, updates and upgrades of their software, as well as improving and expanding the processing capacities, including in the area of cybersecurity (see also [A/76/7](#), para. I.69).

11. As health and safety concerns had been raised by staff starting in November 2020, the Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that given that the platforms were not compliant with the standards of the International Organization for Standardization and that there were continued issues with remote participants having poor connectivity or suboptimal equipment, the health of the interpreters remained a concern. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had engaged with the Division of Health-Care Management and Occupational Safety and Health of the Department of Operational Support and had requested a risk assessment for remote simultaneous interpretation. Specific steps taken by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in all four duty stations during the past few months in response to specific concerns of staff and to mitigate any potential risks associated with the provision of remote simultaneous interpretation included: (a) visual materials on the need for participants to properly set up and act in remote settings; and (b) raising concerns about the health of interpreters in meetings with the Member States. In addition, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Office of Information and Communications Technology planned to engage an engineering consultant in order to have an independent way of measuring metrics to assess platform performance and ability to comply with the relevant standards of the International Organization for Standardization.

III. Documents management

12. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that, owing to COVID-19, overall compliance by author departments with the deadlines for submitting slotted documents for processing decreased from 93 per cent in 2019 to 92 per cent in 2020. Compliance by the Secretariat with the four-week processing deadlines for documents that were submitted on time and within word limits also declined from 99 per cent in 2019 to 93 per cent in 2020. Compliance with the issuance deadlines fell from 94 per cent in 2019 to 90 per cent in 2020. The proportion of documents submitted for processing within agreed word limits remained practically unchanged, at 92 per cent. Lastly, the number of words submitted globally for translation decreased, to just over 216 million in 2020 from over 245 million in 2019 ([A/76/80](#), paras. 21–26).

13. Regarding the documents submitted to the Advisory Committee, the Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that the only dates that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management carried were the slot dates for the official submissions of the manuscripts (advance unedited versions) to the Department for processing. The Department was not aware of when the advance reports were submitted to the Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee notes that it often has to work initially on reports in their unedited advance version submitted to the Committee a short time prior to the start of its consideration. The deliberations of the Committee are sometimes affected, given that the reports officially issued thereafter contain changes. Furthermore, on the basis of the information provided above, there seems to be no supervision over the timing of the submission of the supplementary information and the additional information. **The Advisory Committee reiterates its recommendation that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to fully cooperate with the Committee in order to continue to improve compliance with the submission dates of reports and additional information, while ensuring the quality and accuracy of the information and data provided (see [A/75/565](#), para. 9).**

14. Increased productivity was recorded at all duty stations in 2020, except Nairobi, where the uncertainty in the calendar of meetings in the second quarter of the year, as a result of COVID-19, prevented optimum capacity-planning or the immediate commitment of resources to workload-sharing (*ibid.*, para. 29). The Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that following the decision of the General Assembly, in its resolution [75/252](#), to increase the productivity standard for translation services to 5.8 pages per day, the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management had set up a working group to advise him on the implementation of the new productivity expectation at the different levels. The working group had identified areas in which further optimizations and/or harmonization across duty stations were needed in order to facilitate the implementation of the new mandate. The working group had also recommended additional training for staff. The recommendations of the working group, which had been endorsed by the Under-Secretary-General, were being implemented. Task forces with members of all four duty stations had been established to provide further recommendations where appropriate. Training and support were being provided to staff to help them adapt to the new working methods. Given that the introduction of the new workload standards during the pandemic had created some angst among some staff members, further engagement with staff and staff representatives was to be conducted after the task forces delivered their recommendations (see also [A/76/7](#), para. I.61).

15. Regarding digitization and uploading of older documents, it is indicated in the report of the Secretary-General that a new phase of the project to digitize seven decades of United Nations work and turn it into open knowledge started in April 2020,

resulting in 40,000 documents being earmarked for enhancement through the embedding of additional metadata (A/76/80, para. 34). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that since the Dag Hammarskjöld Library started its in-house digitization programme in 1998, about half a million official documents issued between 1945 and 1993 had been digitized. Presently, 2.5 million important United Nations parliamentary documents remained to be digitized in the Library. One million of those were in dire condition and in need of urgent digitization to mitigate the advanced deterioration and paper acidification. To speed up the digitization of those important old United Nations documents, a fundraising proposal/business case requesting the proposed budget of \$10.5 million had been prepared. It would otherwise take the Department of Global Communications 57 years to complete the digital preservation of this deteriorating content in-house. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the efforts to digitize historic and older documents of the Organization and encourages the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to raise the funds needed to expedite the digitization process. The Committee trusts that information on the outcome of the efforts of the Secretary-General will be included in his next budget submission.**

IV. Staffing

16. Table 3 of the report of the Secretary-General includes vacancy rates in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2020. The most notable increase in vacancy rates, compared with 2019, was in the Documentation Division in New York. Exceptionally, and as an emergency measure, temporary cross-functional assignments of interpreters or verbatim reporters to translation were arranged (see also A/76/80, para. 41). **The Advisory Committee notes the status of the vacancies and expects that all vacant posts will be filled expeditiously.**

17. Regarding outreach, the Secretary-General indicates in his report the efforts made to reach out to language professionals, especially from Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, which grew by 43 per cent in 2020 compared with 2019 (ibid., paras. 44–45). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had consistently used its various communication platforms, including its multilingual social media accounts, to raise awareness of such opportunities. **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.** The Committee will revert to the recruitment process during its consideration of the reports of the Secretary-General on human resources management.

18. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that owing to the pandemic, the number of interns hosted by language services dropped significantly from 80 interns in 2019 to 34 interns in 2020. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in 2020, interns had performed their duties remotely, like the rest of the staff in the language services. The Secretary-General also indicates that the funding of internships or the creation of paid traineeships would greatly increase access of young professionals from less-well-represented regions to on-site practical work experience at the United Nations (ibid., para. 47). Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that given the high cost of living in the four duty stations, interns of modest means were not able to take advantage of internship opportunities and that paid internships or remote internships in New York and Geneva could expand the pool of applicants, especially those from Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. In Vienna, a funding mechanism would be necessary to attract promising profiles and create equal opportunities for all students from all over the world. Funded internships for all language groups would be particularly welcome in Nairobi, owing to the difficulty of

attracting talent to that duty station. The Committee will revert to the internship programme in the Secretariat in the context of the consideration of the report of the Secretary-General on human resources management.

V. Facilities and accessibility

19. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates the efforts made to ensure accessibility in all four duty stations, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution [75/244](#). The Advisory Committee recalls that, in its resolution [74/253](#), the Assembly urged the Secretary-General to implement all 10 recommendations contained in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit ([JIU/REP/2018/6](#)), including recommendation 6, that the executive heads of United Nations system organizations should, by December 2021, provide the option for remote participation in all meetings and conferences that they organize, with no prejudice to the efforts to make attendance at meetings and conferences accessible to persons with disabilities (see also [A/76/80](#), paras. 52–55).

20. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that in New York, the Office of Information and Communications Technology provided communication access to real-time interpretation services. All intergovernmental conference rooms equipped to provide interpretation were similarly equipped to provide captioning and the presentation of sign language. In Geneva, depending on the conference room and its set-up, either chairs were removed to accommodate persons in wheelchairs or dedicated places were made available. Under the strategic heritage plan, heritage conference tables were adjusted to allow more space for wheelchair users. In Vienna, accessibility arrangements were made within available resources and based on the needs of individuals participating in conferences and meetings, given that the Office did not have resources under the regular budget for captioning or sign language interpretation. In Nairobi, the majority of the 2021 calendar of meetings had either been postponed or conducted virtually owing to the closure of the compound following the COVID-19 outbreak. **The Advisory Committee acknowledges the continuous efforts of the Secretary-General regarding accessibility, recalls its previous comments and recommendations on accessibility (see also [A/75/565](#), para. 18, [A/74/538](#), para. 25, [A/74/7](#), paras. I.67–I.68 and [A/73/458](#), paras. 20–21) and encourages the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to ensure accessibility of all individuals.** The Committee will make further observations in the context of its review of the report of the Secretary-General on enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations system.

VI. Conclusion

21. **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.**