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PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1980-1981

Job classification and career development of language staff

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In his report to the General Assembly of 23 November 1979 on the implementation of the classification systems for posts in the Professional and General Service categories (A/C.5/34/37), the Secretary-General stated that he had decided to establish a special group to examine all aspects of, and submit specific proposals on, classification practices with respect to language posts, and the career prospects for language staff in the Secretariat. The Secretary-General informed the General Assembly that it would be his intention to report on the Group's proposals and on their financial implications to the Assembly at its thirty-fifth session and to seek its approval of any required budgetary adjustments.
2. A study group under an impartial chairman consisting of representatives of language staff in the Department of Conference Services (copy-preparers/proof-readers, editors, interpreters, translators and verbatim reporters), of the Under-Secretary-General in charge of that Department, of the Office of Financial Services and of the Office of Personnel Services was established in May 1980 at Headquarters and completed its report in August. As the bulk of the language staff of the Organization are assigned to Headquarters and the United Nations Office at Geneva, it was decided to establish a similar group in Geneva. The latter group, having seen the report of the Headquarters group, met and completed its work during the month of October.
3. The groups had before them, in addition to technical and financial material, two reports, one of which had predated the work of the group and, indeed, been instrumental in its creation, and the other, which was issued later. The first was that of Dr. Jiménez de Aréchaga, the former President of the International Court of Justice, who was requested by the Secretary-General to undertake an inquiry into certain questions affecting inter alia language staff. In his report of 2 April 1979, the inquirer recommended that in the review of the classification of language posts, staff representatives should participate fully, as equal partners.

He also endorsed the recommendations of an interagency meeting on language arrangements, convened by the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination and held in Vienna in July 1974 (see A/C.5/34/37, para. 7 (a) and (b)). That meeting had recommended that a more favourable proportion should be established between the P-5, P-4 and P-3 language posts "in order to provide avenues of advancement and to retain the best staff". It further recommended that:

"Ratios between P-5, P-4 and P-3 language posts ... should be such that career development for language staff would be no less favourable than for other professional staff. A high degree of specialization combined with long professional experience and outstanding performance should justify the promotion of a translator to P-4 or of a reviser to P-5, regardless of any consideration of hierarchy or supervisory responsibility."

The other was the report of the Joint Inspection Unit, dated April 1980, entitled "Evaluation of the translation process in the United Nations system" (JIU/REP/80/7; see also A/35/294). That report points out (paras. 49-50) that most translators begin at P-2, but remain at P-3 for long periods of time, with P-4 the top career level for almost all translation staff. In 1978, 7 per cent of all translation service Professional staff were at the P-2 level, 56 per cent at P-3, 29 per cent at P-4, and only 8 per cent at P-5 or above. The JIU report continues:

"This post-level structure compares unfavourably with the post-level ratios for other professional staff. ... Translators feel that this structure discriminates against them, particularly because competition for translator posts is intense, and recruitment standards high. Language service officials are concerned that this pattern hampers recruitment of high-quality translators since it does not offer adequate career development opportunities."

4. The study group analysed in some detail the difficulties that the Organization has experienced in recent years in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified language staff, owing in large part to the limited career prospects offered to them. Attractive financial and career conditions in the private and freelance markets and growing world-wide demand for the services of language Professionals have made it difficult to retain staff after completion of their training period. This problem has been aggravated by the fact that in addition to linguistic proficiency, language staff are now required, to an increasing extent, to have special knowledge in certain complex substantive fields. The study group felt that improved career prospects would go a long way toward alleviating the problem.

5. It was clear that in previous classification exercises insufficient weight had been given to the considerable independence of language staff in the performance of their work; this is reflected in the relatively small proportion of supervisory staff in the various language units. The study group found that in the linguistic field, the several levels of Professional responsibility are not directly linked with distinct functional and supervisory duties; with certain exceptions, the Professional language career at the United Nations represents a functional continuum, within which the range of grade levels should reflect the increasingly complex specialized or sensitive nature of the staff members' assignments.

6. After having reviewed post descriptions newly established and checked by the Classification Section and the current staffing structures, the Headquarters special study group made the following recommendations:

(a) Copy-preparers and proof-readers

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	-	1	12	11	24
Proposed	1	4	8	11	24

(b) Official Records editors

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	1	5	19	8	33
Proposed	1	9	19	4	33

(c) Interpreters

Recruitment and retention of United Nations interpreters have become difficult owing to the attractive outside market with which the Secretariat is obliged to compete. The Organization has had to rely increasingly on candidates without experience whom it has to train. Not all candidates are successful, and there is no guarantee that those who become interpreters will not leave the Organization for the more rewarding outside market.

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	13	46	54	6	119
Proposed	27	60	26	6	119

(d) Translators

The groups sought a structure for the translation services which would enhance the career prospects of translators and improve the efficiency of the translation process. To this end, they took into account the recommendation of the Joint Inspection Unit for a substantial move in the direction of "self-revision as a basic mode of operations" which would provide considerably better career prospects for translators and result in substantial economies (JIU/REP/80/7, paras. 93, 99-102 and 138). The representatives of the Department of Conference Services indicated that it would be the Department's intention to introduce gradually the practice of self-revision for up to 45 per cent of the current translation work-load. In view of the nature of the work at Headquarters and the likely economies which could be made by self-revision, the Department of Conference Services considered that if the current work-load did not increase, a saving of 46 posts could be achieved. It was agreed that the introduction of self-revision and the concomitant upgrading of staff should be phased over a three-year period.

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	21	103	226	41	391
Proposed	60	146	103	36	345

(e) Verbatim reporters

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	1	8	28	-	37
Proposed	5	4	28	-	37

7. In summary, the Headquarters group recommended the following changes in the grade structure of the language services in the Department of Conference Services:

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL	
Current		36	163	339	66	604
Proposed		<u>94</u>	<u>223</u>	<u>184</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>558</u>
Net increase (decrease)		58	60	(155)	(9)	(46)

8. For the United Nations Office at Geneva, the recommendations, on the basis of the same principles as had been adopted at Headquarters, were:

(a) Copy-preparers and proof-readers

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	-	-	5	9	14
Proposed	-	1	7	6	14

(b) Editors

	P-5	P-4	P-3	TOTAL
Current	1	2	12	15
Proposed	1	4	10	15

(c) Interpreters

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	9	42	45	-	96
Proposed	20	50	20	6	96

(d) Terminologists a/

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	1	-	5	-	6
Proposed	1	2	3	-	6

(e) Translators

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	12	56	110	7	185
Proposed	28	69	60	7	164

a/ The structure of the Documentation and Terminology Section at Headquarters was not reviewed as part of the career development exercise.

9. In summary, the group recommended the following changes in the grade structure of the language services in the United Nations Office at Geneva:

	P-5	P-4	P-3	P-2	TOTAL
Current	23	100	177	16	316
Proposed	50	126	100	19	295
Net increase (decrease)	27	26	(77)	3	(21)

10. Both of these reports were reviewed and approved by the Under-Secretary-General, Department of Conference Services, the Assistant Secretary-General, Office of Financial Services and the Assistant Secretary-General, Office of Personnel Services.

11. The Headquarters group completed its report with the following observations:

"The recommendations unanimously submitted would, if adopted and implemented, result in a far-reaching restructuring of the language services at Headquarters. At the same time, the group is satisfied that its recommendations can be implemented without incurring additional costs at Headquarters, and indeed may result in fairly substantial savings. More importantly, the group considers that its proposals would ensure that the career prospects of language staff will be comparable to those of staff in other professional posts in the Secretariat and that qualified language staff can be recruited and retained to perform their very important functions in the work of the Organization. In the course of their deliberations, and despite their widely divergent initial positions, all the members of the group came to recognize the imperative necessity of tackling the fundamentals of the problem. While the group is aware of the magnitude of its

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recommendations, it considers that any less far-reaching proposals would be unlikely to ensure the continued smooth functioning of the language services at the level required for the efficient performance of the work of the Organization."

12. The Secretary-General fully endorses the recommendations of the groups and proposes that they be implemented over a three-year period, beginning in 1981, at all duty stations of the Organization where language staff are assigned. For 1981, the reclassifications and abolition of posts recommended for Headquarters and Geneva in paragraphs 13 and 14 below will require no additional appropriation, as the additional cost of the former are balanced by the savings which arise from the latter. Should the General Assembly approve the recommendations contained in the present paper, the Secretary-General will request the remainder of the reclassifications and reduction of posts in his proposed budget for 1982-1983.

13. In the Department of Conference Services, the following reclassifications are recommended for 1981:

(a) Copy preparation and proof-reading

1 P-4 to P-5, 1 P-3 to P-4

(b) Official Records editing

3 P-3 to P-4,

(c) Intepretation

6 P-4 to P-5, 10 P-3 to P-4

(d) Verbatim reporting

2 P-4 to P-5

(e) Translation

15 P-4 to P-5, 32 P-3 to P-4  
as well as the abolition of fifteen P-3 posts.

14. At Geneva, the following reclassifications are recommended for 1981:

(a) Copy preparation and proof reading

1 P-3 to P-4

(b) Editing

2 P-3 to P-4

(c) Interpretation

5 P-4 to P-5, 8 P-3 to P-4, 6 P-3 to P-2

(d) Terminology

1 P-3 to P-4

(e) Translation

5 P-4 to P-5, 8 P-3 to P-4  
as well as the abolition of five P-3 posts

15. As regards other United Nations duty stations, the number of language posts is very much smaller than at Headquarters or Geneva. It has not been practicable to convene special study groups to review the situation in these duty stations. As a consequence, the Secretary-General is not yet in a position to report to the General Assembly either on steps which might be taken to introduce the concept of self-revision or on the optimum structure of the language services concerned taking into account the elements discussed in the present report. It is therefore proposed that the Secretary-General be given the authority in 1981 to take such measures as he deems appropriate in these duty stations, along the lines proposed for Headquarters and Geneva. Due regard would be given to the particular circumstances obtaining in each duty station, including the nature and scale of the work. He would intend to report on any such measures to the thirty-sixth session of the General Assembly, through the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.

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