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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/75/89](#)). In addition, the Committee had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2020 ([A/75/32](#)), 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 18 October 2020.

2. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [74/252](#) and other relevant mandates. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that there were no financial implications resulting from the report. **The Advisory Committee is of the view that the report contains a number of initiatives that may have some financial implications, including those to leverage technology, increase productivity and to address the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the liquidity situation. The Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to provide comprehensive information on the financial implications of such initiatives, if any, in the context of the next report on the pattern of conferences.**

3. The Advisory Committee recalls that, with regard to the proposed programme budget for 2021, 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/75/7](#), chap. II, paras. I.52–I.79).



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 that the report of the Secretary-General ([A/75/89](#)) 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. The Committee also trusts 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 and documents management

5. In his report, the Secretary-General indicates that all four duty stations made efforts to improve the interpretation utilization rate ([A/75/89](#), para. 9). As a result, the overall utilization rate in 2019 rose to 84 per cent, or 2 percentage points higher than in 2018 (ibid., figure I). The total number of meetings held at the four duty stations in 2019 increased from 34,962 to 36,892, or by 6 per cent compared with 2018 (ibid., figure II).

6. As for meetings held away from established headquarters, the Secretary-General indicates that, in 2019, notional savings of \$668,019 were achieved through integrated global management, 18 per cent less than in 2018. Of that amount, \$340,000 was saved in travel costs that accrued to the organizers of meetings through the United Nations Office at Nairobi. Such savings are dependent on factors beyond the control of the Secretariat, such as the number, timing and venue of the meetings (ibid., para. 13). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that notional savings were a way of quantifying efficiencies in servicing meetings away from headquarters, whereby such meetings were serviced by teams from the geographically closest duty station rather than that at which the body that is meeting is headquartered, through the application of integrated global management.

7. In his report, the Secretary-General explains that administrative instruction [ST/AI/416](#) of 26 April 1996 has been superseded by administrative instruction [ST/AI/2019/4](#) of 23 September 2019, entitled “Use of space at Headquarters in New York for meetings, conferences, events and exhibits”. The new instruction serves to define roles and responsibilities in the organization of meetings and events that are not part of official intergovernmental processes (ibid., para. 14). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in the four duty stations, there were different mechanisms for cost recovery and charge-back for services provided in this context. **The Advisory Committee trusts that information relating to the cost recovery mechanisms in all four duty stations will be provided to the General Assembly at the time of its consideration of the report of the Secretary-General (see also [A/74/538](#), para. 10) and will be included in the future reports of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences.**

8. The Secretary-General indicates that the overall compliance by author departments with the deadlines for submitting slotted documents for processing (editing, translation and formatting) rose slightly in 2019, to 93 per cent. Compliance by the Secretariat with the four-week processing deadlines for documents that were submitted on time and within word limits also rose, to 99 per cent. Meanwhile, compliance with the issuance deadlines remained high, at 94 per cent (A/75/89, para. 26). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, pursuant to the respective mandates calling for reports, the slot dates were established between the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the author departments for submission of the reports to the Department. Those dates in turn were used to monitor and report upon the progress made for timely submission and issuance.

9. The Advisory Committee was further informed that, of the 122 reports submitted for consideration by the Fifth Committee in 2019, 113 (or 93 per cent) had been submitted in a timely manner. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the reference made to the 113 out of 122 reports being submitted on time was the list of reports for consideration by the Fifth Committee submitted thus far. The list also included other reports that were not subject to consideration by the Advisory Committee and reports that were yet to be submitted. The Committee was further informed that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management did not have tracking information on when author departments had submitted their advance unedited reports to the Advisory Committee. All reports were discussed between the secretariat of the Advisory Committee and the Documents Management Section planning team of the Department in order to identify possible submission dates. The Committee notes that the information provided by the Department on the dates of submission of the Advisory Committee reports does not take into consideration many factors, including the number of days taken to receive responses from the Secretariat after concluding the hearings on the various reports, which in 2019 was three weeks on average, with a maximum of 83 days in one case. In 2020, as at 20 October, the average number of days taken between hearings and the submission of responses to questions raised during such hearings is 26 days. The number of days taken to submit responses, along with the quality of such responses, has an impact on the time taken by the Advisory Committee to finalize and submit its reports, which is always coordinated with the Fifth Committee secretariat. **The Advisory Committee recommends 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.**

10. The report of the Secretary-General includes an update on the digitization project, indicating that a new phase of the project “Digitization: turning seven decades of United Nations work into open knowledge” started in April 2020 and is expected to last five years. The new phase will be focused on enhancing the metadata and accessibility of official United Nations documents (ibid., para. 42). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the current project built on an earlier project, which pertained to the digitization and electronic storage of historic and older documents. In the previous project, the digitization of those documents was key, given that they (particularly those dating from between 1945 and 1960) were in decay and rapidly disintegrating. The current project was based on several core activities to process the approximately 78,000 documents (1.25 million pages) of documents that had been scanned and uploaded. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the efforts to digitize historic and older documents of the Organization.**

11. With regard to leveraging technology, the Secretary-General provides information in his report on the addition of new features and functionalities to gMeets,

enhancements and upgrades to the *Journal of the United Nations*, the expansion of the use of Indico, the open-source meeting registration and accreditation tool, updates to the digital recordings platform and the development of a fully automated speech-to-text technology in Geneva (ibid., paras. 16–22). In the context of documents management, two new knowledge management tools were developed: (a) the Athena knowledge hub, which is an online platform accessible to all language staff, including contractors, that provides access to instructions, standard operating procedures and manuals for each language, as well as guidance and information about the technologies developed by the Department for use by internal staff and external clients; and (b) the SPOT, which is a self-paced online training tool that was finalized in 2019 and launched on 1 April 2020 during the first weeks of telecommuting on account of the COVID-19 pandemic (ibid., para. 43). Also, a new eLUNa module was created to convert General Assembly resolutions to machine-readable format and a new prototype for a new information technology tool known as the “official record builder and informational tool”, or Orbit, was tested (ibid., paras. 45 and 48). **The Advisory Committee acknowledges the efforts of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and encourages the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to leverage technology in the work of the Department and standardize the technology used in the main duty stations (see para. 2 above).**

III. Staffing

12. In paragraphs 55 to 59 of his report, the Secretary-General describes efforts made in 2019 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 remote tool for testing interpreters and the use of social media. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, owing to the present liquidity situation and as part of the mitigation measures in effect since 1 April 2020, onboarding of candidates selected for vacant language positions has been postponed and recruitments have been put on hold. As at 30 September 2020, the French Translation Service in New York has 17 vacancies (3 P-5, 8 P-4 and 6 P-3); the Russian Translation Service in New York has 12 vacancies (1 P-5, 7 P-4 and 4 P-3); and the Spanish Translation Service has 12 vacancies (2 P-4 and 10 P-3). **The Advisory Committee notes the status of the vacancies and expects that all vacant posts will be filled expeditiously.**

13. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was provided with tables showing the distribution of the interpreters and translators for all official languages by nationality in the four duty stations in 2017, 2018 and 2019 (see annex). **The Advisory Committee reiterates that, while acknowledging the efforts of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to increase the geographical diversity of English, French and Spanish translators, the Committee continues to note a concentration of translators and interpreters in the three languages from a limited number of countries and therefore recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to take additional measures to increase the geographical diversity (see A/75/7, chap. II, para. I.66).**

14. Regarding outreach, upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management continued to implement an “outreach programme” that was aimed at: (a) raising awareness about current and future opportunities in United Nations language services; and (b) ensuring greater alignment of existing training programmes for language professionals with the highest standards of the United Nations, with a view to attracting qualified applicants to pursue a language career at the United Nations. To achieve those goals, United Nations language services relied on a number of instruments, such as ad hoc

cooperation and formal agreements with relevant institutions, partnerships with international organizations and Member States, the hosting of internships and traineeships and the use of a variety of communication products, including its multilingual websites and social media channels, to promote internships in language services and to invite applications to competitive examinations for language professionals from qualified applicants from as wide a geographical base as possible. **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.**

15. The Advisory Committee was also informed, upon enquiry, that while the total number of interns hosted by the United Nations language services at the four duty stations had decreased by 8 per cent in 2019, the number of interns from the African region and from the Latin American and Caribbean region had increased over the same period, by 50 per cent and 120 per cent, respectively. A total of 16 nationals representing 11 countries of those two regions had been hosted, six from the African region and 5 from the Latin American and Caribbean region. In 2020, internships had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as travel restrictions and alternate working arrangements were in place, and intern recruitment was on hold. Several United Nations language services opted for remote coaching in lieu of formal internships. **The Advisory Committee notes the efforts made as regards the internship programme and encourages the Secretary-General to make further efforts to ensure the geographical diversity of the language interns.**

16. In his report, the Secretary-General explains the austerity measures introduced in October 2019 as a result of the liquidity crisis, including the cancellation of annual leave and the non-hiring of the usual temporary external support during the peak period of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly (A/75/89, para. 70). Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, during the pandemic period, effective 16 March 2020 to date, the translation services have achieved throughput productivity of 6.7 pages per translator per day. In order to cope with the workload while limiting the use of external capacity owing to the liquidity crisis, annual leave management was implemented in the Documentation Division in New York. For the period January to August, the Division recorded 5,384 days of leave in 2020, compared with 9,053 in 2019 and 9,534 in 2018. In Geneva, there was no verifiable information on whether there had been cancellations of annual leave owing to austerity measures in the last quarter of 2019, but based on a trends analysis carried out on the usage of annual leave in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been a noticeable decrease in the use of leave days since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 compared with the same months in 2019. In Vienna, some staff were asked to consider postponing their leave due to the exigencies of service. **The Advisory Committee is concerned about the cancellation of leave requests and recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to explore alternative ways to meet the workload without adversely impacting on staff well-being and mental health.**

IV. Facilities and accessibility

17. In its resolution 74/253, the General Assembly urged the Secretary-General to implement all 10 recommendations contained in the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (A/74/217; 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. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was

informed that commercially available platforms had been tested at the four duty stations and the regional commissions. On the basis of the results, a procurement exercise had been initiated in May 2020 to obtain licences for further testing and the possible provision of remote interpretation services to meetings both at which all participants and interpreters were remotely located and at which interpreters and other support staff worked from United Nations premises, with all or some participants attending remotely.

18. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in July 2020, remote simultaneous interpretation systems were added to the range of existing options. Current solutions presented challenges to varying degrees for the participation of persons with disabilities regarding screen readers and the ability to receive captioning and clearly receive sign interpretation. Platforms and vendors were aware of the need and were making efforts to remove such barriers in the foreseeable future. Progress had been made at all duty stations in 2019 to implement the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy. The Secretariat's conference-servicing operations continued to arrange accessibility services for the meetings that were entitled to such services or that had extrabudgetary provisions for such services. **The Advisory Committee continues to acknowledge the efforts of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management regarding accessibility, recalls its previous comments and recommendations on accessibility (see also [A/74/538](#), para. 25, [A/73/458](#), paras. 20–21, and [A/74/7](#), paras. I.67–I.68) and encourages the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to ensure accessibility to all conference services. The Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to include comprehensive information on accessibility for persons with disabilities in his future reports on the pattern of conferences.**

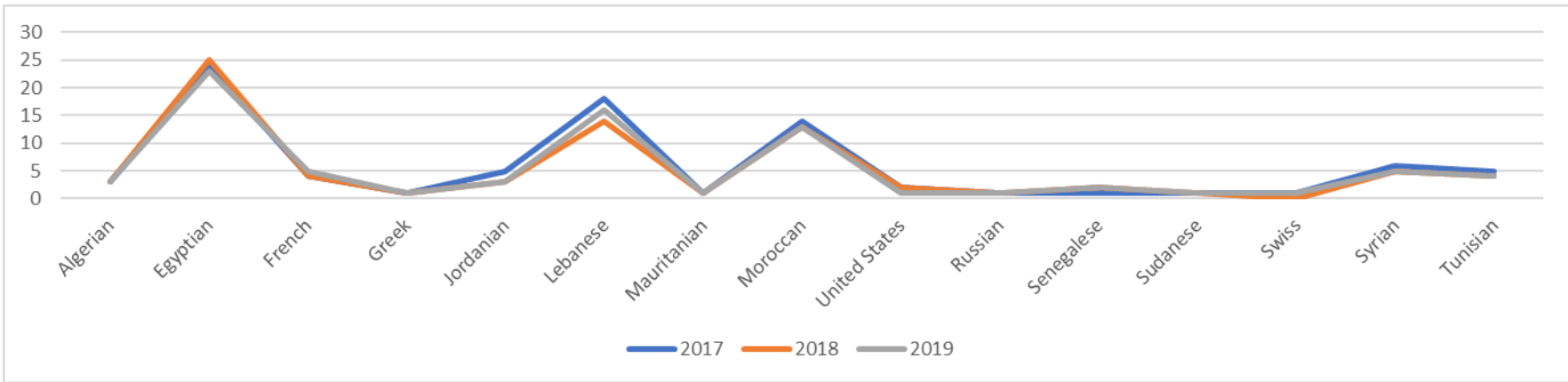
V. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

19. In the introduction of his report, as well as in the information received by the Advisory Committee upon enquiry, the Secretary-General explains the impact of the pandemic on the conference services, including the cancellation and postponement of calendar and non-calendar meetings, the need to re-accommodate and reschedule the cancelled or postponed meetings, the low level of conference-servicing resources and the complexity of providing remote interpretation to virtual meetings. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed of the lessons learned and best practices gained during the pandemic and adjusted ways of working. The financial implications of not conducting meetings will be determined at the end of the year and reported to the General Assembly as part of the performance reporting.

20. **The Advisory Committee acknowledges the efforts of the Secretary-General to provide services during the pandemic and trusts that updated information regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various services provided by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the efficiency measures, along with the cost implications of the initiatives taken to address the ongoing challenges, will be provided to the General Assembly, at the time of its consideration of the Committee's first report on the proposed programme budget for 2021 ([A/75/7](#)) (see also [A/75/7](#), chap. II, para. I.77).**

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.**



Spanish language (interpreters and translators), by duty station

<i>Duty station</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Argentine</i>	<i>Chilean</i>	<i>Colombian</i>	<i>Cuban</i>	<i>Egyptian</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Moroccan</i>	<i>Peruvian</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>Swiss</i>	<i>United States</i>	<i>Venezuelan</i>	<i>Total</i>
New York	2017	3	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	28	0	2	0	35
	2018	4	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	26	0	2	0	35
	2019	4	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	20	0	1	0	28
Geneva	2017	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	22	1	0	0	25
	2018	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	18	1	0	0	22
	2019	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	22	1	0	0	25
Vienna	2017	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	1	8
	2018	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	3	0	0	1	9
	2019	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	1	7
Nairobi	2017	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	4
	2018	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	3
	2019	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2

Spanish language (interpreters and translators), overall, by year

<i>Year</i>	<i>Argentine</i>	<i>Chilean</i>	<i>Colombian</i>	<i>Cuban</i>	<i>Egyptian</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Moroccan</i>	<i>Peruvian</i>	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>Swiss</i>	<i>United States</i>	<i>Venezuelan</i>	<i>Total</i>
2017	5	1	2	2	0	1	1	1	1	54	1	2	1	72
2018	5	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	49	1	2	1	69
2019	5	1	3	1	1	0	2	0	0	46	1	1	1	62