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Pattern of conferences

Pattern of conferences

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

   The present report has been prepared pursuant to resolution 74/252 and previous resolutions on the subject and responds to the mandates addressed to the Secretary-General contained therein. It also provides information on procedures and activities relating to the pattern of conferences in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2019.

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* A/75/50.

I. Introduction

1.   The Secretariat succeeded in delivering on all its core mandates in conference services in 2019. The austerity measures implemented during the last quarter in response to the liquidity crisis facing the Organization notwithstanding, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management finished the year with a 6 per cent increase in the number of meetings serviced. All key performance indicators for conference management remained as high as in 2018 and in some cases even improved. Overall utilization of interpretation resources increased from 82 to 84 per cent; and in documentation, submission compliance rose from 90 to 93 per cent and processing compliance from 98 to 99 per cent.

2.   The austerity measures had to be taken during a peak period for many parts of the Secretariat's conference-servicing operations and resulted in the curtailment or delay of some services, creating difficulties for clients. Nevertheless, all mandated meetings were serviced, and all pre-session slotted documents submitted on a timely basis were processed as scheduled. In addition, electronic tools, such as the *Journal of the United Nations*, the Department's computer-assisted translation tool, eLUNa, and the one-stop shop for meeting services, were improved, and the range and accessibility of services were expanded. This was achieved thanks to effective resource and capacity management, the creativity and dedication of staff, and continued strategic efforts to leverage the newest technologies and adapt working methods.

3.   The encouragement of innovation and a proactive pursuit of improvement have in the past few years resulted in greater harmonization of the conference-management systems used across the Secretariat and generated efficiencies, in particular in document processing. The professionalism of the staff and the new working methods introduced in 2018 enabled the Department to absorb an increased workload in 2019 while still assuring quality at the highest level. The full implementation of an electronic workflow for editing and translation and in the production of verbatim records and publications also positioned the documentation services strongly for the switch to emergency telecommuting when the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic struck in March 2020. Although the Secretariat lacked the information and communications technology platform needed to provide remote multilingual simultaneous interpretation to intergovernmental meetings at the beginning of the pandemic, swift measures taken in March 2020 to identify and procure the necessary services enabled it to offer remote simultaneous interpretation by United Nations interpreters in June 2020.

4.   Overall, in terms of business continuity and disaster preparedness, the Secretariat's conference services passed the real-life test of the COVID-19 pandemic with their complete and rapid transition to a virtual environment. The pandemic is a human tragedy of enormous proportions, but the experimentation that was made necessary, as often happens in crises, has brought about new ways of working that may continue to be in demand in the future, benefiting multilingualism and improving efficiency and the work-life balance for staff and delegates alike.

5.   As shown in the present report, the conference-servicing operations of the Secretariat at all four duty stations continue to ensure the highest levels of quality, timeliness and cost-effectiveness and to demonstrate commitment to increasing the accessibility and sustainability of their activities while supporting the practical application of multilingualism in the deliberations of Member States.

II. Meetings management

A. Adoption of the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2021

6.   The Committee on Conferences will review, at its substantive session in September 2020, a draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2021 as prepared by the Secretariat (A/AC.172/2020/L.2) and transmit its recommendations to the General Assembly in its report for 2020 (A/75/32).

B. Requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243

7.   Requests to meet during the main part of the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly have been received from eight bodies thus far. In accordance with established practice, the requests will be reviewed by the Committee, which will make a recommendation to the Assembly.

C. Intersessional departures

8.   The Committee approved five requests for intersessional departures.

D. Utilization of conference-servicing resources by United Nations organs

9.   All four duty stations made efforts to improve the interpretation utilization rate as requested by the General Assembly in paragraph 19 of resolution 74/252, by engaging with the relevant intergovernmental and expert bodies, as appropriate. As a result, the overall utilization rate in 2019 rose to 84 per cent, as shown in figure I.
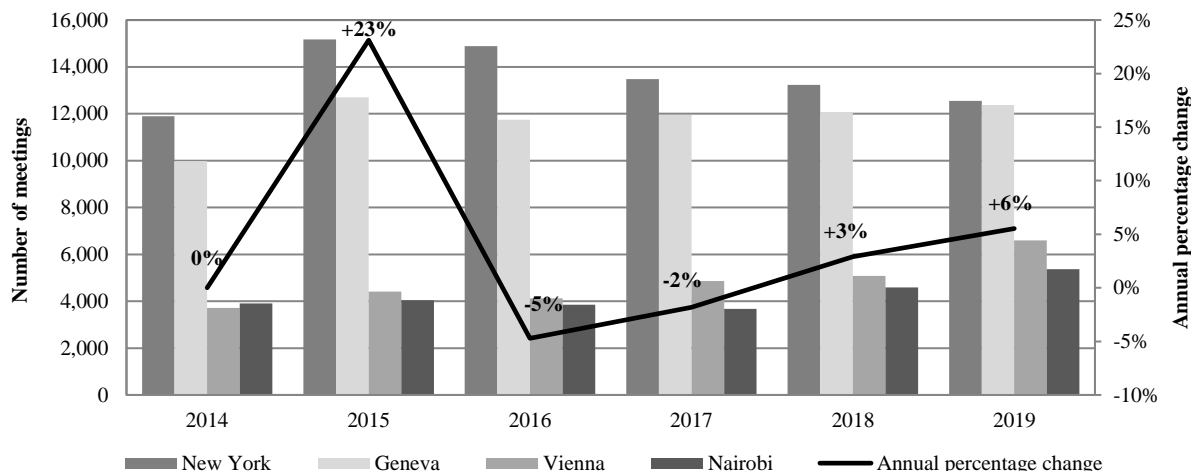
Figure I
Interpretation utilization factor of all calendar bodies, 2014–2019
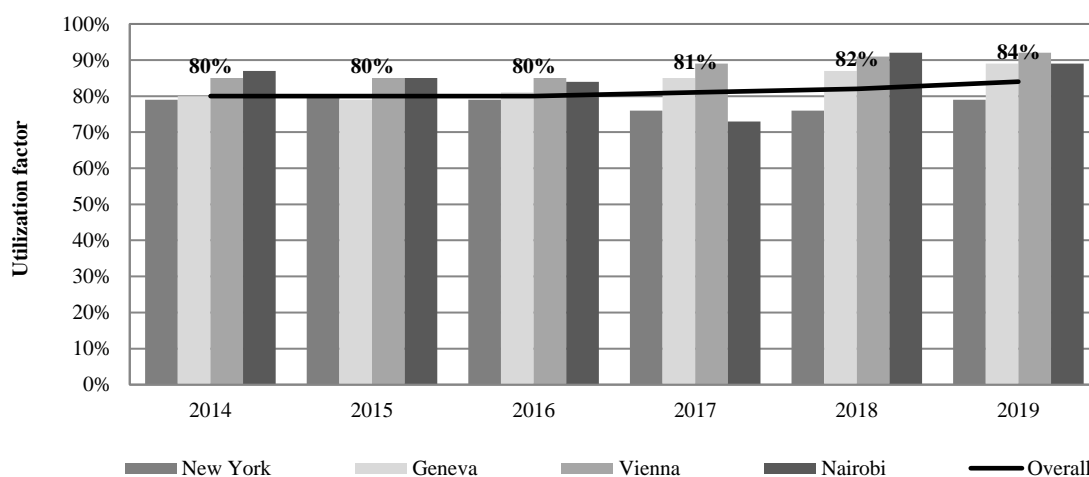
10.   The total number of meetings held at the four duty stations in 2019 increased by 6 per cent compared with 2018, from 34,962 to 36,892, as shown in figure II. The

number of non-calendar meetings increased by 42 per cent compared with 2014, accounting for 82 per cent of all meetings serviced by the Department.
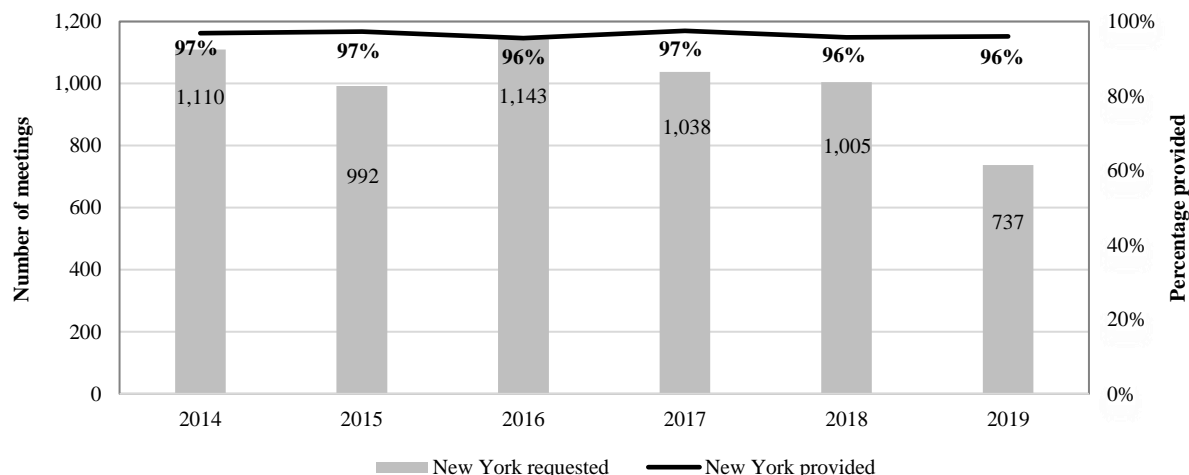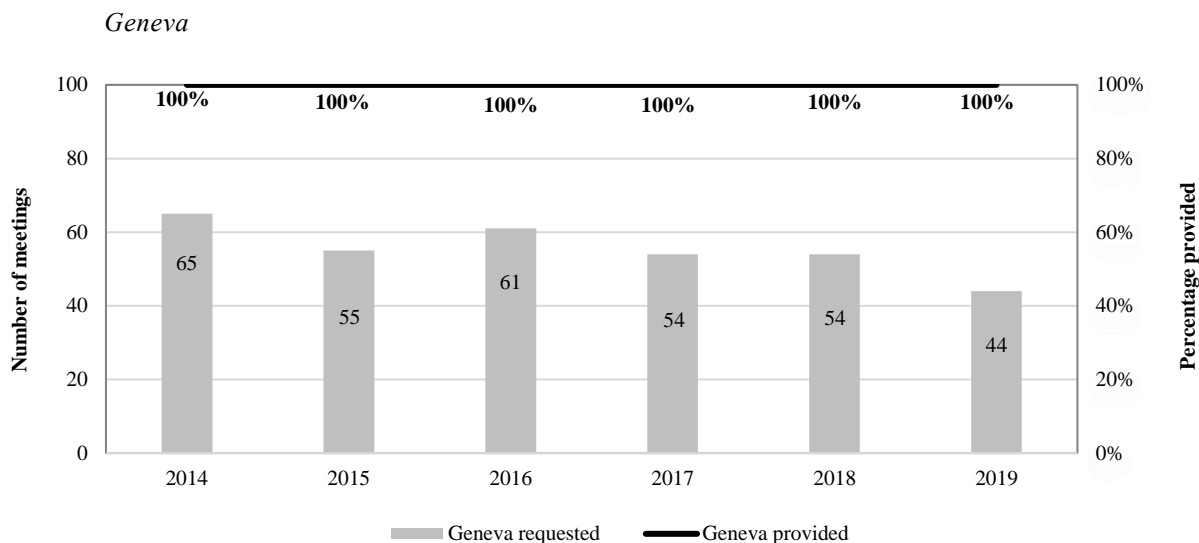
Figure II
Meetings workload, 2014–2019

E. Provision of interpretation services to bodies entitled to meet "as required"

11.   The provision of interpretation services to bodies entitled to meet "as required" is shown in figure III for New York and Geneva. In New York, the percentage of such requests remained the same as in 2018. In Geneva, the only body entitled to meet "as required" is the Human Rights Council, and all its requests for interpretation services and meeting rooms were met. There are no bodies entitled to meet "as required" in Vienna or Nairobi.

Figure III
Provision of interpretation services to bodies entitled to meet "as required", 2014–2019

New York

Geneva

F. Provision of conference services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States

12.   Figure IV provides a summary of the provision of conference services to regional and other major groupings of Member States in New York and Geneva from 2014 to 2019. All requests for meeting rooms made by such groupings were met in 2019, as in previous years. In New York, the percentage of accommodated requests for interpretation decreased by 3 percentage points, as compared with 2018, owing to improved utilization by calendar bodies, which reduced the resources available for other meetings. The Division of Conference Management of the United Nations Office at Geneva received more requests for meetings with interpretation services in 2019 than it had in 2018, but the proportion of requests met was lower, at 70 per cent, primarily as a result of last-minute cancellations by regional groups. In Nairobi, there were only two such requests, one of which was not accommodated owing to unavailability of interpreters, while in Vienna there were no such requests.

Figure IV
Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States in New York and Geneva, 2014–2019
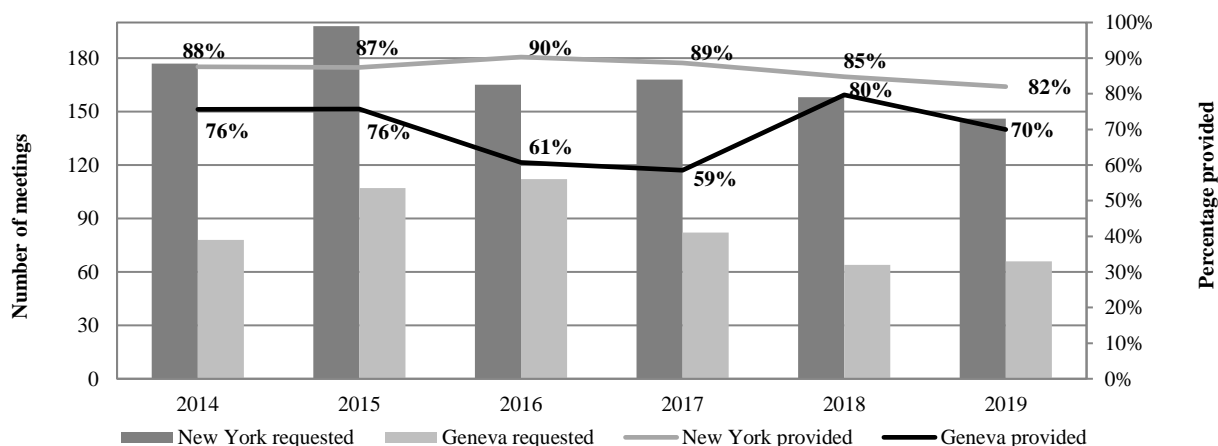
G. Meetings held away from established headquarters

13.   All duty stations continued to apply the integrated global management rule, where appropriate, when assembling teams to service meetings held away from headquarters. 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. It should be noted that the additional workload of coordinating and servicing such meetings is not reflected as an administrative cost to the United Nations. Furthermore, the Division of Conference Management of the United Nations Office at Geneva provided interpretation services to 100 missions undertaken worldwide by the special procedure mandate holders of the Human Rights Council.

Figure V
Notional savings from shared services of meetings held away from headquarters, 2014–2019
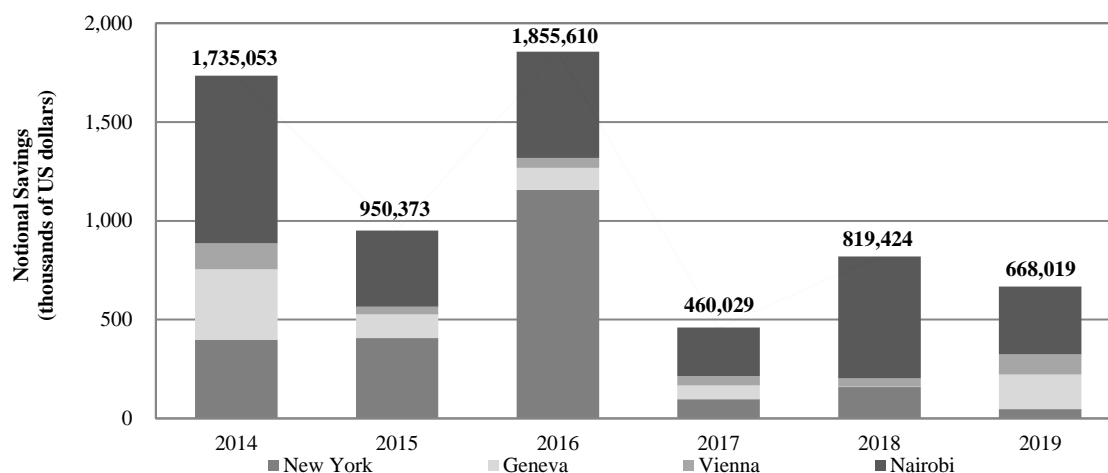
H. Use of United Nations premises

14.   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. A questionnaire has been incorporated into the one-stop shop in gMeets, the enterprise electronic system used for the implementation and monitoring of the calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations, to ensure that such meetings and events are consistent with the purposes and principles of the Organization and are non-commercial in nature.

15.   A new information circular, ST/IC/Geneva/2020/2 of 7 January 2020, was issued in Geneva, in line with administrative instruction ST/AI/2019/4, to set out arrangements for the use of premises at the United Nations Office at Geneva for meetings, conferences, events and exhibits. In Vienna, the approval of the substantive secretariats must be obtained before conference services are provided.

I. New developments in meetings management in 2019

Leveraging technology

16. In New York, new features and functionalities were added to gMeets. Training was organized for representatives of Member States and United Nations system entities. The number of meetings not related to the intergovernmental processes managed through the one-stop shop in gMeets has increased rapidly since its roll-out in March 2018, more than tripling to 8,384 in 2019. The meetings were requested by 135 permanent missions, 21 regional groups and 185 United Nations system entities.

17. In 2019, the digital *Journal of the United Nations* underwent major enhancements and upgrades, including improved user experience on mobile devices, more modern templates, greater accessibility, single-click access to comprehensive meeting information and the option to print the latest PDF version directly from the *Journal* website in the six official languages of the United Nations.

18. The use of Indico, the open-source meeting registration and accreditation tool that provides the meeting participant management solution for conference and event management in Umoja, continued to expand. By the end of 2019, it had been used at 3,031 conferences at and away from headquarters for 20,841 meetings and the registration of over 400,000 participants. The infrastructure for the tool has been moved to the Enterprise Data Centre in Valencia, Spain, fulfilling the requirements for enterprise-wide systems. The project team is working on rolling out an upgraded version to existing clients at the end of 2020.

19. In Geneva, the client base using the self-service tool for estimating the resource and financial implications of conference services and of various technical and support services was expanded to include six other United Nations entities[1] and an additional 40 permanent missions. Users can run multiple scenarios by selecting which services to include and altering the duration of meetings or conferences and other requirements to see the associated cost impact.

20. Digital recordings continue to be valuable tools for précis-writers, secretariats and delegates who need access to content immediately after a meeting. Digital recordings were made for over 3,000 meetings in Geneva in 2019, as had been done in 2018. Critical updates were made to the platform in 2019, making it more user-friendly and linking it to remote participation tools, such as Listen Live and webcasting. A major overhaul is planned for 2020. The United Nations Office at Nairobi provided digital recordings for more than 2,000 meetings upon request. The main users include the United Nations Dispute Tribunal, the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat). Three Vienna-based bodies entitled to written records also continued to use digital recordings in 2019, with two of them using the recordings in lieu of written records.

21. In late 2019, the United Nations Office at Geneva piloted a fully automated speech-to-text technology to convert over 375 hours of audio recordings of public calendar meetings into transcripts. Highly positive feedback was received from delegates and from secretariats, including of the Office for Disarmament Affairs, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, attesting to the usefulness of this additional tool for capturing meeting content. The transcripts in the pilot were offered in English only, but will be extended to the other five official languages,

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[1] Economic Commission for Europe, Mine Action Service, Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research.

starting with French in 2020. The service will be rolled out throughout 2020 and offered on a trial basis for a select number of calendar meetings.

22.   In response to the request to ensure the archiving of official meeting webcasts in the six official languages on the United Nations website, in early 2020, the Office of Information and Communications Technology coordinated a series of workshops with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Department of Global Communications to explore the feasibility of a technological solution to automate the transfer of basic metadata that could be made available in the official languages on the United Nations Web TV website. Work is being done to identify ways to integrate the systems used in the management of the relevant metadata and to see whether timely and accurate basic metadata can be extracted in a format suitable for public display and searches. Language staff will still be required to review and approve language metadata content before it is published on the public website.

Impact of the liquidity crisis on meetings management

23.   In October 2019, in response to the liquidity crisis, I wrote to Member States to inform them of the austerity measures being introduced as a result. The measures had various impacts on the meetings services provided. For example, in order to contain expenses, meetings and events held outside of regular meeting hours (i.e. 10 a.m.–1 p.m. and 3–6 p.m.) could not be accommodated. The Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies were not able to arrange for meetings to be held in parallel with those scheduled for the General Assembly, and additional meetings could not be planned. Requests for overflow rooms were also not granted. This situation had an impact on the ability of these bodies to deliver their programmes of work. The impact on the provision of interpretation services was less appreciable thanks to prudent capacity management, including in terms of the annual leave of staff, and to the fact that restrictions on temporary assistance were offset by the reduction in meeting assignments associated with the scheduling limitations.

24.   All mandated meetings at the United Nations Office at Geneva were serviced, but the austerity measures had some negative consequences: for example, only two teams of interpreters were sent to service the twenty-fifth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in December 2019, instead of the three that would normally be provided to an event of that magnitude; one of the counters of the Distribution Section was closed; and the introduction of the Documents Helpdesk, which provides individualized support and training for delegates to locate online versions of documents, was delayed.

25.   The impact of restricted hours of operation affected the income-earning capacity of the United Nations Office at Nairobi and inconvenienced clients, forcing many to seek alternative meeting venues.

III.   Documents management

A.   Timely submission, processing and issuance of documents

26.   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, as shown in figure VI. 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 (see figure VII). Meanwhile, compliance with the issuance deadlines remained high, at 94 per cent, as shown in figure VIII.

Figure VI
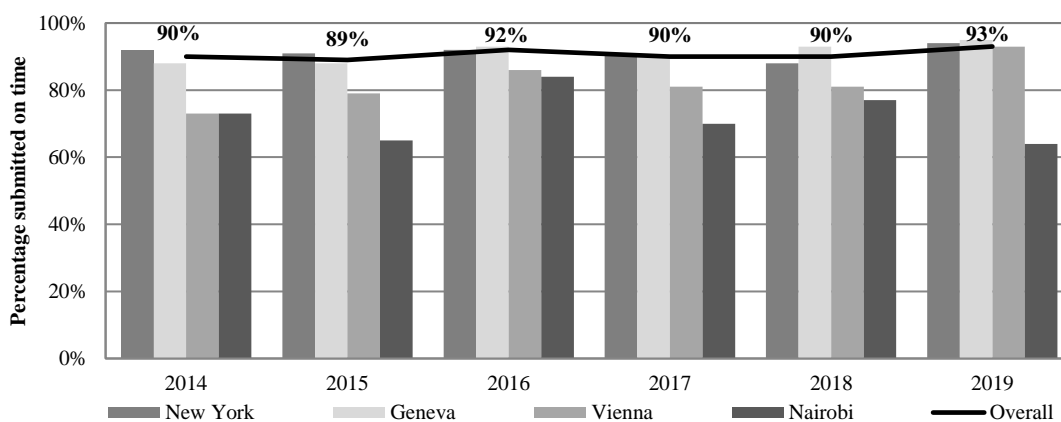**Timely submission of slotted documents, 2014–2019**

Figure VII
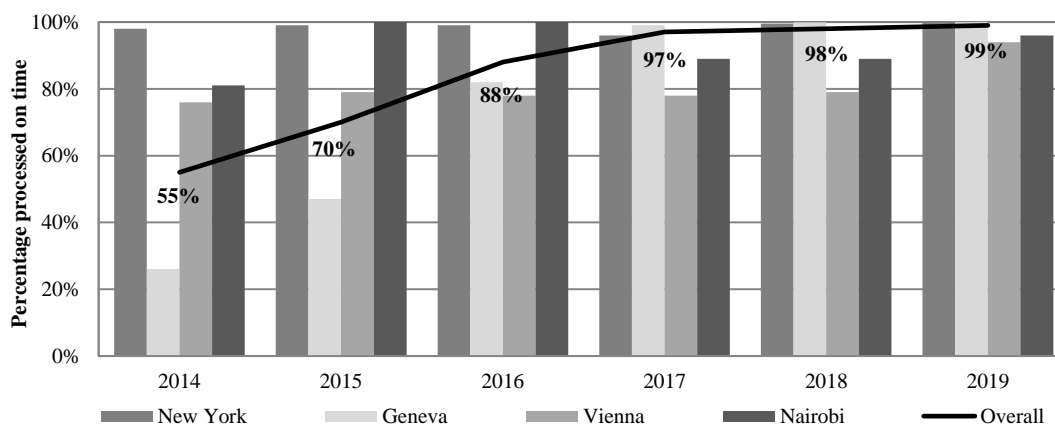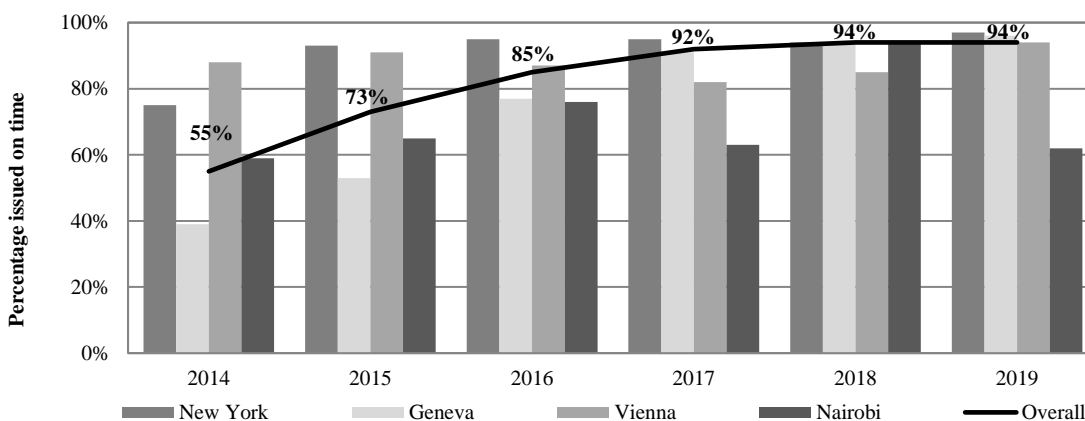**Timely processing of slotted documents, 2014–2019**

Figure VIII
Timely issuance of slotted documents, 2014–2019

27. In New York, to enhance predictability and improve system-wide efficiency, efforts continued to slot reports for submission earlier than the mandated 10-week or 8-week benchmark, and the rate of timely submission rose notably, from 88 per cent in 2018 to 94 per cent in 2019.

28. To address documentation issues related to the Fifth Committee, the Department continued to refine the slotting schedule in full consultation with the author departments and offices and the secretariats of the Fifth Committee and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, as appropriate. However, as in previous years, the reports of the Advisory Committee were often submitted very close to the dates of their consideration by the Fifth Committee, which necessitated rush processing.

29. In Geneva, timely submission compliance reached 95 per cent in 2019, continuing the upward trend generated by regular interactions and follow-up with substantive secretariats to improve the quality of forecasting and planning. Three of the submitting entities attained 100 per cent submission compliance. In Vienna, timely submission compliance rose by 12 percentage points to 93 per cent in 2019 thanks to an outreach initiative and more frequent consultations with substantive secretariats. In Nairobi, timely submission fell from 77 per cent in 2018 to 64 per cent in 2019: 194 out of a total of 225 documents were initially submitted on time; however, the figure then fell to 145 when departmental corrections were received after submission. The United Nations Office at Nairobi continued to work in close collaboration with submitting entities to assist them in the early stages of planning.

30. In terms of processing, the rate of compliance with the mandated time frames in New York in 2019 was 99.6 per cent for Secretariat reports and 99.7 per cent for non-Secretariat reports submitted on time and within the word limits. The corresponding figures in Geneva were 100 and 99.8 per cent, respectively. In Vienna, processing compliance rose significantly, from 79 per cent in 2018 to 94 per cent in 2019, thanks in part to improved projections of and preparedness for workload peaks. In Nairobi, processing compliance also rose, from 89 to 96 per cent. The practice of placing documents on hold pending the receipt of departmental corrections continued to be a major factor hampering processing compliance at the duty station.

31. In New York, the proportion of slotted documents issued in accordance with the mandated time frame increased by 3 percentage points, from 94 per cent in 2018 to 97 per cent in 2019, while the number of documents issued on time increased by 14 per cent, from 1,271 to 1,445, thanks to the slightly smaller volume of words received for processing and the dynamic reprioritization of the workload.

32. Issuance compliance in Geneva reached 96 per cent in 2019, up from 94 per cent in 2018. For documents submitted on time and within the word limits, compliance reached 99.7 per cent, thanks to the concerted efforts of all stakeholders to improve planning, identify priorities and closely monitor progress. The practice of staggering the submission of documents for intergovernmental bodies with long sessions, such as the Human Rights Council, continued throughout the year. The tight deadlines notwithstanding, all 16 General Assembly and Economic and Social Council supplements were issued in a timely manner. In addition, all 42 universal periodic review outcome reports issued in 2019 were issued six weeks prior to the start of the session or the date of consideration.

33. In Vienna, overall issuance compliance increased to 94 per cent in 2019 from 85 per cent in 2018. During the slotting exercise, volumes and processing times were carefully planned with client secretariats so that the additional workload could be handled within agreed parameters. In all cases, enough time was ensured for consideration of the information before meetings. In Nairobi, overall issuance compliance fell sharply, from 94 per cent in 2018 to 62 per cent in 2019, owing mainly to the receipt of departmental corrections while documents were in process.

B. Control and limitation of documentation

34.   The number of words submitted globally for translation rose from 234 million in 2018 to over 245 million in 2019, as shown in figure IX.

Figure IX
Translation workload, 2014–2019
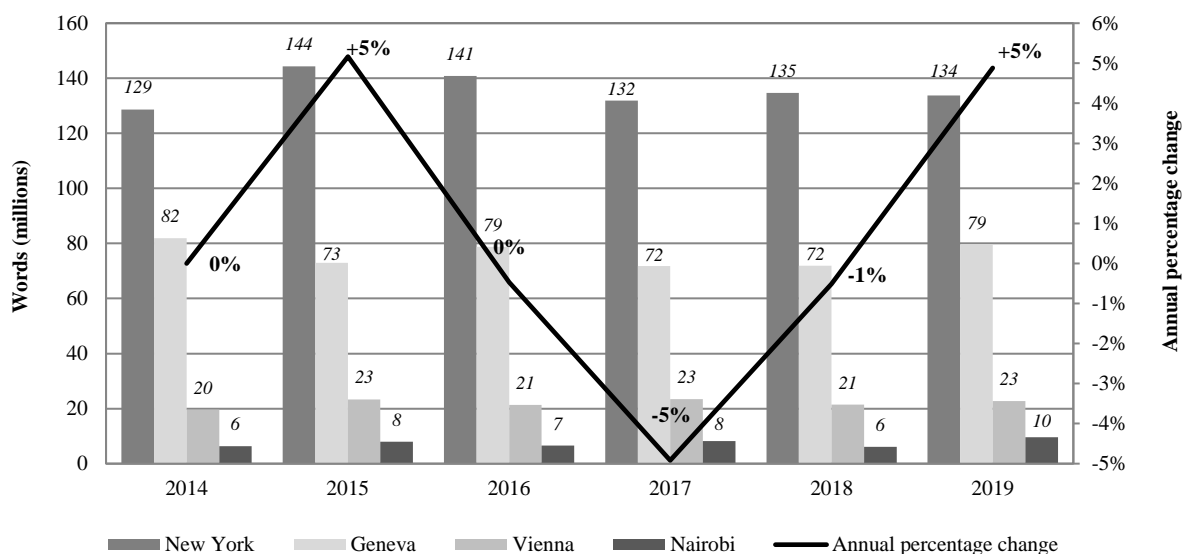
35.   The proportion of documents submitted for processing within word limits remained practically unchanged at 92 per cent (see figure X).

Figure X
Documents submitted for processing in line with the mandated or agreed word limits, 2014–2019
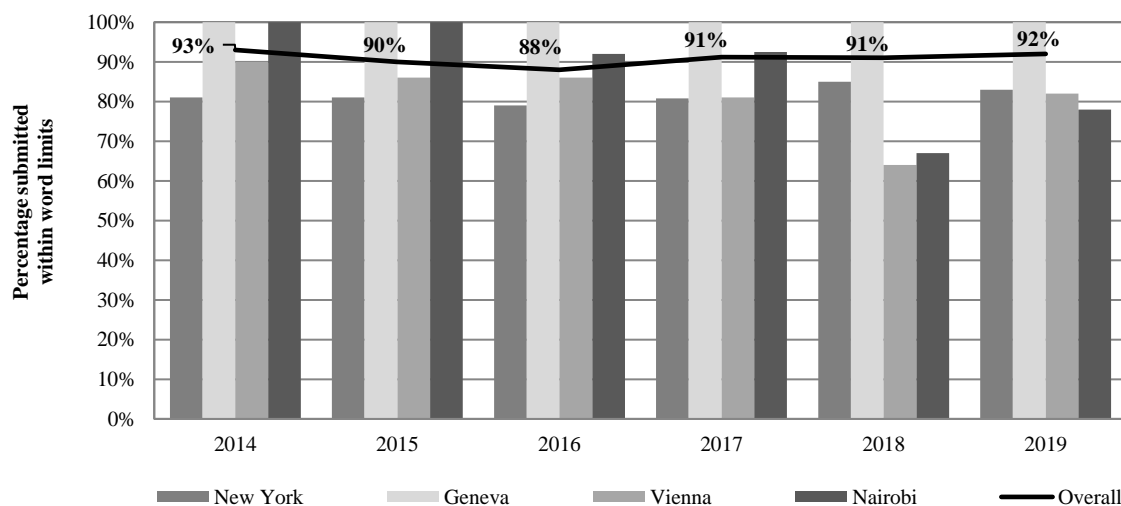
36.   In New York, the translation workload was similar to that of 2018, with over 133 million words translated. Consultations were held with author departments and offices to explore options to ensure that Secretariat reports remained within the mandated word limits, and only 32 waiver requests were submitted in 2019 compared with 75 in 2018. The overall percentage of slotted documents that complied with the established word limits shrank slightly, however, from 85 per cent in 2018 to 83 per cent in 2019. In Geneva, the 2019 translation workload increased by 13 per cent compared with 2018, with more than 83 million words submitted for translation. The increase was due to a higher volume received from several human rights treaty bodies and the International Law Commission. Since 2012, Geneva has been strictly implementing word limits for all slotted documents and closely monitoring submissions from the treaty bodies for compliance with the word limits and the number of languages for translation, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 68/268. In 2019, waivers were granted only for seven Joint Inspection Unit reports that could not be slotted owing to their nature.

37.   In Vienna, the translation workload slightly increased in 2019 compared with 2018 but was consistent with historical patterns. A significant volume of documents processed in Vienna are of a legal nature and exempt from word limitations. Nevertheless, the percentage of documents complying with the word limits increased from 64 per cent in 2018 to 82 per cent in 2019.

38.   In Nairobi, budgetary and technical or legal documents that exceeded the mandated word limits were given negotiated slot dates earlier than the standard patterns. Overall compliance rose from 67 per cent in 2018 to 78 per cent in 2019.

C. Productivity

39.   The throughput productivity of the translation services, that is, the total number of words processed divided by the staff hours spent translating them, for 2015–2019 is shown in table 1. Increased productivity was recorded at all duty stations, with levels converging as planned towards those initially attained in New York, where new working methods and technologies were first introduced. The most noticeable increase was in Nairobi, thanks in part to greater leveraging of eLUNa, which supports the work of translators in the efficient identification of previously translated text. In Geneva, the increase was mainly the result of changes in working methods, specifically a 68 per cent rise in monitored self-revision output and a 7 per cent increase in self-revision output. It is important to note that in both Geneva and Nairobi these improvements were achieved while the translation services were handling noticeably larger workloads than in 2018 – 56 per cent larger in the case of Nairobi.

Table 1
Throughput productivity of the translation services, 2015−2019

(Pages per day)

| Duty station	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
New York	5.8	5.9	5.9	6.1	6.2
Geneva	4.8	5.1	5.0	5.3	5.5
Vienna	5.1	5.4	5.2	5.4	5.9
Nairobi	5.9	5.8	5.3	4.9	5.8

D. Workload-sharing

40.   The volume of workload shared among the duty stations is shown in figure XI. Over the years the shared workload has become increasingly varied, with

proofreading being added to the mix in 2019. It should be noted that workload-sharing is important for managing not only the volume but also the timing and priority of the documentation processed by the Secretariat.

Figure XI
Workload-sharing among duty stations, 2014–2019, in words and by type
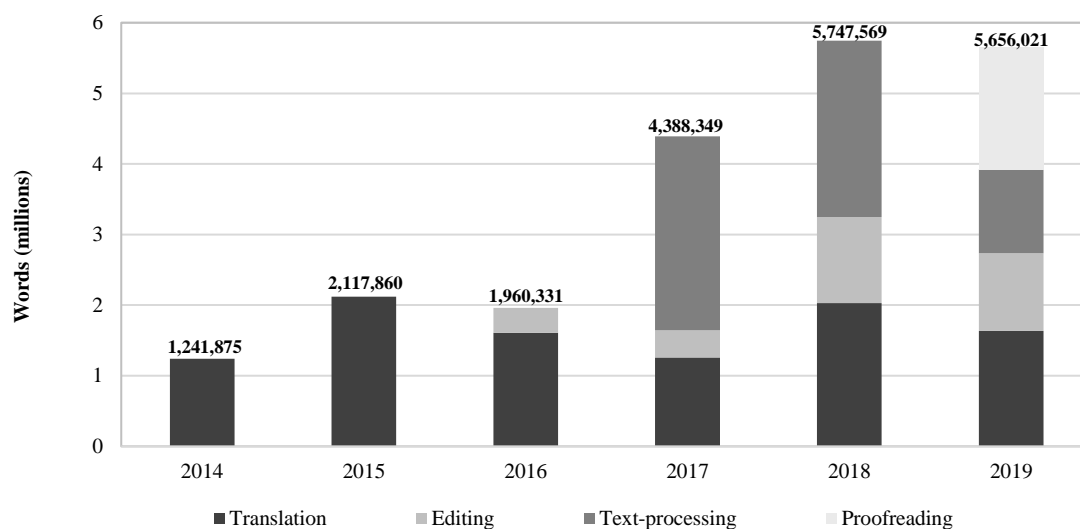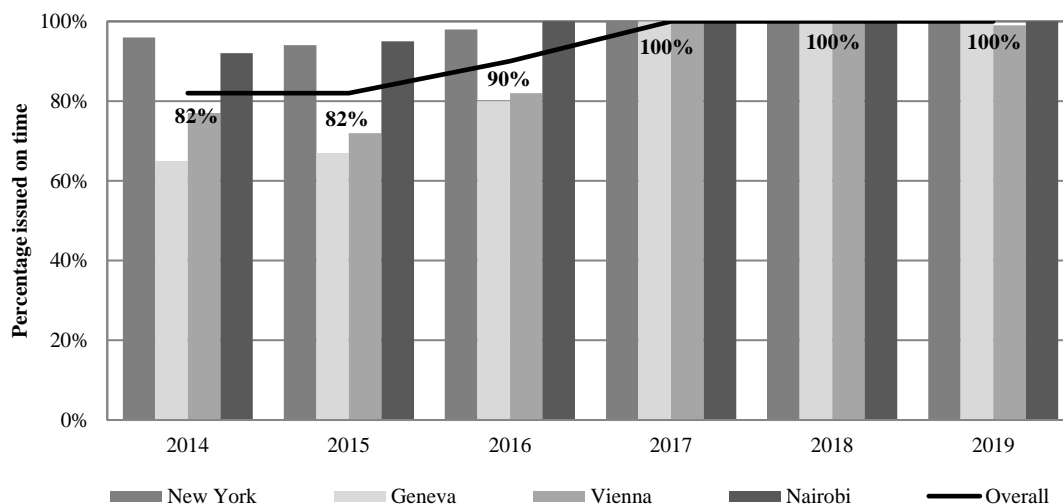
E. Simultaneous issuance of documents

41.   One of the pillars of multilingualism is the simultaneous issuance of documents in the six official languages. All duty stations achieved 100 per cent compliance again in 2019, as shown in figure XII.

Figure XII
Compliance with the simultaneous issuance requirements, 2014–2019

F. Digitization and uploading of important older United Nations documents

42. The Secretariat welcomed the additional contribution from the Government of Qatar in 2019 to support a new phase of the project "Digitization: turning seven decades of United Nations work into open knowledge", which started in April 2020 and is expected to last five years. The new phase will focus on enhancing the metadata and accessibility of official United Nations documents. The scanning of older documents that were not digitized during the initial scanning project is also envisaged.

G. New developments in documents management in 2019

Leveraging technology

43. The quality of documentation services is assured through several mechanisms, ranging from selecting language professionals of the highest calibre through demanding examinations to performing quality control on all output. One activity that has a direct impact on quality is training and continuous professional development. To support those processes, the Documentation Division in New York developed two new knowledge management tools in 2019. The first, the Athena knowledge hub, 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. The other is the SPOT, 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. The SPOT contains over 500 learning activities and resources, including lessons, quizzes and other materials, that were developed in-house in the six official languages by small teams in each translation service. The aim of the SPOT is to facilitate the effective sharing of knowledge on the substantive work of the Organization and its bodies among language staff, with a view to maintaining or enhancing the quality of the documentation produced.

44. Work continued to enhance the suite of applications being developed as part of gText, an umbrella project to develop innovative language tools for computer-assisted translation, editing and terminology management. The architecture of eLUNa was restructured to provide full accessibility for visually impaired users. In addition, automatic checking features were added or improved to help to detect inconsistencies in terminology or omissions, and new neural machine translation engines were added in the six official languages. The gText applications have been presented regularly at international meetings on language technologies, including the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) and the International Annual Meeting on Computer-Assisted Translation and Terminology (JIAMCATT), where they have generated great interest. Service-level agreements have been signed with several international organizations, granting them access to the tools on a cost-recovery basis.

45. A new eLUNa module was created to convert General Assembly resolutions to machine-readable format. The converter automatically retrieves external information about the resolution, including with regard to sponsors, voting and related Sustainable Development Goals, and embeds the data in an electronic file. These enriched, machine-readable resolutions will enable further innovations in the future, from an improved search function to the extended use of automation, including the automatic compilation of the volumes of Assembly resolutions through robotic writing, planned for 2020.

46. The two main gText applications, eLUNa and UNTERM, are now used in all main conference-servicing duty stations and the regional commissions, as well as by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). eLUNa

and UNTERM were also implemented in 2019 at the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO). In 2020, access to eLUNa will be provided to United Nations interpreters, as well as language staff at the Department of Global Communications, and both eLUNa and UNTERM are scheduled to be deployed at the World Health Organization (WHO). With the addition of terminology from UNESCO, WMO and IMO, as well as WHO in 2020, the UNTERM portal continues to expand the use of official and harmonized terminology system-wide, while fostering a collaborative approach in which each entity is able to focus on its own areas of specialization and avoiding duplication of work. As a result, all users have access to multilingual, reliable and consistent terminology entries. All the language tools developed by the Department, including eLUNa, UNTERM, Athena and the SPOT, are available in the six official languages and are accessible to all staff, including those on temporary appointments and contractors.

47.   In 2019, in my capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, I encouraged organizations of the United Nations system to refer to UNTERM, with a view to harmonizing the terminology used across the system. Furthermore, in the context of the United Nations semantic interoperability framework, the secretariat of the High-level Committee on Management, in a joint effort with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, and in collaboration with technical experts from across the United Nations system, produced a taxonomy of Sustainable Development Goal identifiers, that is, a system of internationalized resource identifiers for the Goals, the related targets and indicators and related entities, linking them to thesaurus terms of the United Nations Bibliographic Information System. These common identifiers constitute a key infrastructure element that will allow United Nations system organizations and relevant stakeholders to conceptually link their Goals-related content to the growing pool of knowledge about the Goals available on the Semantic Web.

48.   In 2019, the Documentation Division in New York completed the initial development and trialling of a prototype for a new information technology tool known as the "official record builder and informational tool", or Orbit. Its function is to increase the quality, consistency and productivity of précis-writing by automating several related processes. The tool will also enable data-sharing to support other processes in the documentation chain. Following the approval of a business case and governance structure, the full development of Orbit as part of the gText project was scheduled to proceed in 2020 but has had to be postponed to 2021 owing to the continuation of the liquidity crisis.

49.   The design and multimedia team at the United Nations Office at Geneva designed the 2019 publication version of the report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization, with compelling visuals and extensive infographics to help readers to engage with complex aspects of the Organization's work. The six language versions of the report, which were edited and translated by the Documentation Division in New York, were transformed into a multilingual website, which was adopted as part of the UN News Reader application for comfortable viewing across mobile devices.

50.   The project to develop gDoc 2.0, a comprehensive document workflow system to replace two existing systems, gDoc and the Documents, Conference and Production Management System, was scheduled to be finalized in December 2019. Modules to forecast documentation and publication requests were implemented, but the completion of the project was delayed owing to the liquidity crisis.

Impact of the liquidity crisis on documents management

51. The austerity measures introduced in October 2019 as a result of the liquidity crisis had a severe impact on the documentation processing managed by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. Restrictions were placed on the use of contractual and temporary staff and on the filling of vacancies. This forced the language services to rely almost entirely on in-house capacity. In some services, the impact was significant. In New York, the backlog in the translation of treaties into English and French for the *Treaty Series* continued to grow because all internal capacity was required to process urgent slotted and unslotted documents, and the production of summary and verbatim records was delayed by several months. The absence of temporary assistance in the English Translation and Editorial Service, for example, halved the capacity to prepare summary records during the main part of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly. In the French Translation Service, where a significant part of the workload was usually processed through contractual translation and temporary assistance owing to the high vacancy rate in the Service, capacity planning had to be entirely reviewed and scheduled annual leave postponed.

52. In Geneva, the translation of replies from Governments in the context of OHCHR had to be suspended, which prompted queries and complaints. Some ad hoc requests from bodies that the United Nations Office at Geneva is mandated to service, such as to translate in-session petition documents for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, could not be met owing to insufficient capacity. Similarly, other mandated ad hoc submissions were postponed on a case-by-case basis. In Vienna, because overtime was not an option and short-term recruitment not permitted, the length of certain annual publications had to be reduced, the publication of others postponed and the processing of some parliamentary documents delayed.

IV. Staffing

A. Vacancies, recruitment and innovations in staffing

53. The vacancy rates by duty station in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2019 are presented in table 2. The most notable increase was in the translation services in New York, reflecting the recruitment restrictions imposed in October in response to the liquidity crisis. The onboarding of successful candidates in the recent examinations for French and Russian translators, editors, verbatim reporters and copy preparers, proofreaders and production editors, in particular, has been delayed and is being further affected by the COVID-19 crisis, leaving those languages, as well as Spanish, with lower capacity than other official languages.

Table 2
Vacancy rates in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2019
(Posts)

	New York		Geneva		Vienna		Nairobi	
	Number	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
Interpretation services	6	5	3	3	–	–	3	16
Translation services	40	12	9	5	4	9	1	5
Text-processing units	19	15	7	9	4	11	–	–
Editing services	2	7	4	19	2	33	N/A	N/A
Verbatim Reporting Service	2	4	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Abbreviation: N/A, not applicable.

54.   Staffing levels in the interpretation services ensured adequate interpretation capacity in the official languages and the full implementation of the Secretariat's multilingualism mandate regarding interpretation. The COVID-19 pandemic has raised questions about the modes of delivery of interpretation services in the future. The situation is under review and will be reported on in due course.

B.   Recruitment of language professionals

55.   Thanks to the successful overhaul of the competitive examinations for language posts in the documentation services, including the organization of combined examinations and the shift to fully remote testing, the translation services of the Secretariat can now meet their succession-planning needs by organizing fewer of these resource-heavy recruitment exercises at less frequent intervals. The only competitive examination concluded in 2019 was that held for Russian translators, editors, verbatim reporters and copy preparers, proofreaders and production editors, in which 336 eligible candidates were assessed and 28 placed on the roster after an intensive round of tests and interviews. Of those, 17 were graduates of partner universities (i.e. universities that have signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations on the training of language professionals) as part of the Department's university outreach programme.

56.   Language posts are not subject to geographic distribution because language staff are recruited through rigorous competitive examinations to identify professionals with the superior and highly specialized skills required by the United Nations conference services. Nevertheless, the Department conducts extensive outreach campaigns before each examination to encourage participation by potential candidates from less well-represented regions and actively seeks to support the development of young professionals from those regions through on-site internships and remote practicums. Almost 40 per cent of all interns hosted by the language services in 2019 were nationals of African or Latin American and Caribbean countries.

57.   The online platform used by the interpretation services for their recruitment examinations was also used to conduct three remote training programmes in 2019. Twenty-one interpreters, mostly recent graduates with Arabic, English or French in their language combinations, benefited from those efforts. In addition, a special two weeks of training at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, followed by seven weeks of remote classes from March to May 2019, were arranged for interpreters with English and French as their working languages as part of ongoing efforts to boost local interpretation capacity in Africa. The programme, which was advertised in December 2018, attracted 92 applicants: 42 were selected and 15 participated. In a further effort to target interpreters in Africa, an accreditation test was administered in May for 50 candidates using remote tools and on-site facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the Economic Commission for Africa, resulting in the accreditation of 14 interpreters.

58.   In addition to internships and training programmes, the language services held multiple skills-building and informational sessions during the year with potential applicants. The staff time spent on such activities was 54 per cent higher than in 2018, benefiting 26 training institutions. The network of universities that signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations on cooperation in preparing candidates for language competitive examinations was expanded in 2019 with the incorporation in June of Moscow State Linguistic University and the signing in May of an associate membership agreement with the University of Belgrano, Argentina, on the margins of the sixth conference of the network, hosted by the Middlebury Institute of

International Studies at Monterey.[2] The Department continued to use social media in the six official languages in support of its outreach programme. The number of its followers on Twitter and Facebook increased during the year by 21 and 27 per cent, respectively. The number of subscribers to the Department's YouTube channel also increased by 58 per cent, while the number of views rose by 48 per cent.

59.   The first phase of the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation project, covering the period 2015–2019, concluded. As a result, the five member universities now have sufficient training capacity and adequate equipment and facilities to teach interpreting and translation in compliance with international standards. The project provided 171 bursaries for tuition, and 165 students received support for internships or work placements. As of November 2019, there were 58 more interpreters and 77 more translators, trained and ready for the African and global markets. The Directorate-General for Interpretation of the European Commission is now exploring the possibility of continuing to support an interpreter and translator training project in Africa, and the United Nations Office at Nairobi is redoubling efforts to find an African partner to continue the project.

C.   New developments in staffing

60.   The pilot outposting to Vienna of translators from the French Translation Service in New York ended in 2019. From the middle of 2016 to the end of 2019, six staff members of the Service worked from Vienna. The initial retention goal was not reached (four of the translators left the Service), and the cost savings were marginal. The time-zone difference, considered useful to translate some rush documents, did not fully compensate for the burden of a split team in terms of management, communication, performance management and team-building. In the light of those results, there are no plans to pursue outposting as a staff retention tool.

Impact of the liquidity crisis on staffing

61.   As noted above, the austerity measures introduced in response to the liquidity crisis included restrictions on the recruitment of new staff to fill vacant posts and on the use of contractual or temporary assistance, which affected the language services in various ways. Apart from directly conflicting with the mandate, set out in paragraph 103 of General Assembly resolution 74/252, to fill vacancies in the language services, in particular in the translation services and interpretation services, in a timely manner and in full compliance with relevant provisions of the Assembly resolutions governing recruitment for language staff, the sudden and unexpected hiring freeze created sizeable inequalities across the translation services in their staffing levels. This placed a disproportionate burden on staff in services that were due to fill vacancies when the measures were imposed. The Russian Translation Service, for example, had planned to fill several posts in the last quarter of 2019 in the wake of the successful competitive examination concluded earlier in the year. That situation, if prolonged, is likely to have a negative impact on the delivery of documentation in 2020. As to smaller duty stations, such as Vienna, one or two vacancies in a language section may reduce capacity by as much as one third.

62.   The restriction on the use of contractual and temporary staff had direct and indirect negative consequences. The services that regularly rely on temporary assistance during peak periods experienced a sudden and drastic reduction in capacity, which had a direct impact on their ability to deliver. This was particularly significant in Vienna, where

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[2] Associate membership agreements are signed with universities that have potential to support the long-term succession-planning needs of the United Nations, but do not fully qualify for membership in the network of universities that have signed a memorandum of understanding.

contractual and short-term staff make it possible to deliver services to the non-Secretariat organizations that contribute to the total budget. Meanwhile, the heavy curtailment of outreach and training activities as a result of the need to focus efforts entirely on core mandates severely disrupted succession planning work and is also expected to hamper future recruitment efforts. The continued imposition of austerity measures as a result of the liquidity crisis in 2020 will almost certainly exacerbate the situation.

V. Facilities and accessibility

A. Remote meeting participation facilities

63.   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 (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. After considering the technical solutions, collaborative platforms and practices already in place, plans to implement the recommendation were accelerated with the sudden imposition in March 2020 of physical distancing measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Intensive work got under way to facilitate remote participation, including remote interpretation. Commercially available platforms were tested at the four duty stations and the regional commissions. On the basis of the results, a procurement exercise was initiated in May to obtain licences for further testing and the possible provision of remote interpretation services to meetings in two scenarios: one in which all participants and interpreters are remotely located; and the other in which interpreters and other support staff work from United Nations premises, with all or some participants attending remotely.

B. Accessibility

64.   Progress was 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 are entitled to or have extrabudgetary provisions for such services. These include communication access real-time translation, sign language interpretation, the provision of assistive devices, on-demand Braille printing and accessible seating. The Department also helped to coordinate Secretariat interaction with the Steering Committee on Accessibility created on the initiative of the President of the General Assembly, which has issued recommendations on awareness-raising, accessible seating, wayfinding, the accessibility of documentation and information, the use of accessibility centres and support for accessibility needs. Through an innovative partnership arrangement with CBM International, the Department conducted awareness-raising for its staff and colleagues in other departments, both in New York and at other duty stations.

65.   In Geneva, closed-captioning services were provided for 142 meetings, and sign language interpretation was arranged for 122 meetings in 2019. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in accordance with its mandate, received additional accessibility services, such as national sign language interpretation, closed-captioning in French, Russian and Spanish, access to documentation in Braille and hearing loops. A comprehensive standard operating procedure for the organization of accessible meetings and events was developed and published on the website of the United Nations Office at Geneva in 2019. In addition, accessibility awareness training was arranged for staff of services in contact with persons with disabilities. Work also

continued with stakeholders on accessibility considerations related to the strategic heritage plan.

66.   In Nairobi, seating arrangements for conferences held at the Gigiri complex were modified to facilitate access to the room and podium for delegates with physical accessibility needs. Provisions for reasonable accommodation were incorporated into the design of the facilities that will be built to replace some existing office blocks. Accessible routes, ingress, egress and signage, as well as accessible audio and intuitive wayfinding, including in emergency situations, are now reflected in the plan for the new facilities.

67.   The United Nations Office at Vienna commissioned a study from the Austrian Disabilities Council, an umbrella group for persons with disabilities, to recommend specific remedial actions to remove barriers to participating in conferences or meetings at the Vienna International Centre for persons with various categories of disabilities, including those relating to vision, hearing, cognition and mobility. On the basis of the results of the study, the Conference Management Service prepared a plan to procure recommended assistive technologies and adaptive furniture in a multi-stage approach as funding becomes available and as a basis for setting up an accessibility centre for conference participants.

VI.   Measuring the quality of conference services

68.   To monitor the provision of high-quality conference services to Member States, the Secretariat collects feedback through a global e-survey that is available throughout the year in the six official languages. In 2019, 90 per cent of all respondents to the e-survey rated the conference services as either "good" or "very good". In New York, that figure was 89 per cent; in Vienna, it was 100 per cent. In a separate local survey in Geneva, the corresponding figure was 98 per cent. The United Nations Office at Nairobi carried out two surveys, one for the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Minamata Convention on Mercury, held in Geneva in November 2019, and the other for the seventeenth session of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment, held in Durban, South Africa, in November 2019, and no negative complaints were received. To supplement the global e-survey, the United Nations Office at Vienna launched its own interactive, multimedia survey, named "the Quiz", in 2019. Available in the six official languages, the Quiz was administered in the meeting room on handheld tablets. The innovative format yielded response rates much higher than the traditional approach of soliciting feedback by way of a post-meeting email. In its first year, the Quiz generated 127 responses.

Informational meetings with delegations in 2019

69.   At six separate language-specific informational meetings held in New York, members of delegations indicated their satisfaction with the quality of the language services and acknowledged the substantial work undertaken behind the scenes to ensure that meetings and deliberations are conducted smoothly and successfully. The Division of Conference Management in Geneva organized a single informational meeting with permanent missions, as did the conference-management operations in Vienna and Nairobi.

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Conclusions

70.   Notwithstanding 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, the conference-management services of the Secretariat once again demonstrated the ability of United Nations staff to deliver on core mandates through creativity and exemplary work ethics. Non-core activities were affected, however, with the production of certain documents being severely delayed and vital activities, such as training and recruitment, drastically curtailed.

71.   Previous innovations in documentation management bore fruit in 2019 and beyond. With the development of fully remote recruitment examinations and an extensive outreach programme, the language services no longer face major challenges to succession planning, and the development of a suite of customized, purpose-built, Internet-based technological tools not only has improved productivity and supported quality in document processing, but also has created the conditions for an effective emergency transition to mandatory telecommuting in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

72.   The inventiveness, flexibility and agility of the conference-servicing operations, developed through the Department's strategy of continued modernization and improvement, together with the dedication of Secretariat staff, are proving invaluable in ensuring business continuity during the exceptional circumstances that have arisen in 2020. Now, just as always, the Secretariat remains committed to delivering high-quality documentation and meeting services in a timely manner in the service of the multilingual deliberations of the Member States.

B. Action recommended of the General Assembly

73.   **The Secretary-General recommends that the General Assembly:**

(a)   **Take note of the present report;**

(b)   **Consider the calendar of conferences and meetings on an annual basis, in line with the budget cycle, and request the Secretary-General to present future calendars on an annual basis, at least for the duration of the trial annual budget period stipulated in Assembly resolution 72/266 A.**

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