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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/78/96](#)). In addition, the Committee had before it the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2023 ([A/78/32](#)), which includes the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences in annex I to that report. During its consideration of the report, the Advisory Committee received additional information and clarifications, concluding with written responses dated 4 October 2023.

2. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [77/255](#) and other relevant mandates. The report provides information on procedures and activities relating to the pattern of conferences in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in 2022. As indicated by the Secretary-General, the report also highlights the measures taken to continue to ensure the strengthening of business continuity and continued investment in technology and the progress made in integrating tools that are crucial to implementing the mandate of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management with other enterprise software systems, such as Umoja and Inspira ([A/78/96](#), paras. 1–4).

II. Meetings management

3. In his report, the Secretary-General explains that in 2022, the Department continued to deliver high-quality multilingual conference services as restrictions from the pandemic were incrementally lifted at all four duty stations, allowing conference services to gradually return to a “normal” mode of servicing of the intergovernmental process. While still below the pre-pandemic levels at all duty stations, the number of meetings increased 66 per cent year-on-year in 2022, as the

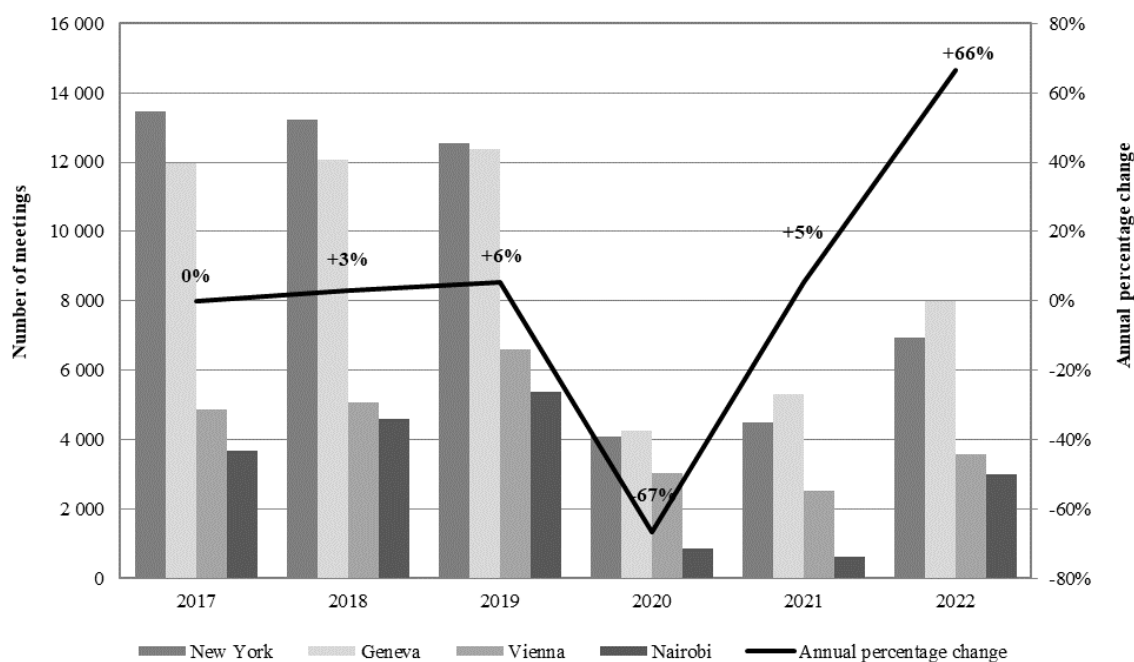


total global number of meetings held went from 12,924 in 2021 to 21,511 in 2022, as reflected in table 1 and figure I (ibid., paras. 5–6, table 1 and figure I).

Table 1
Number of meetings held, global totals, 2017–2022

Number of meetings	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Global total	33 975	34 962	36 892	12 266	12 924	21 511

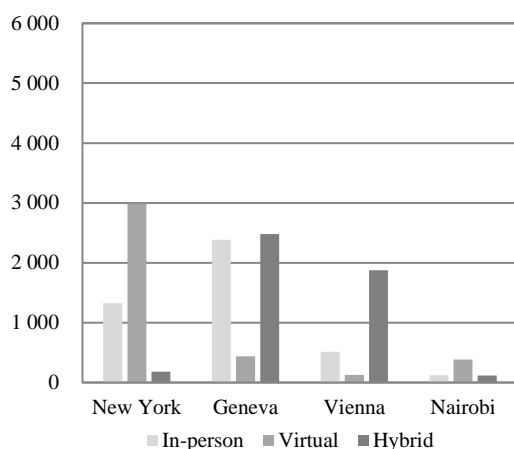
Figure I
Meetings workload at the four main conference-servicing duty stations, 2017–2022



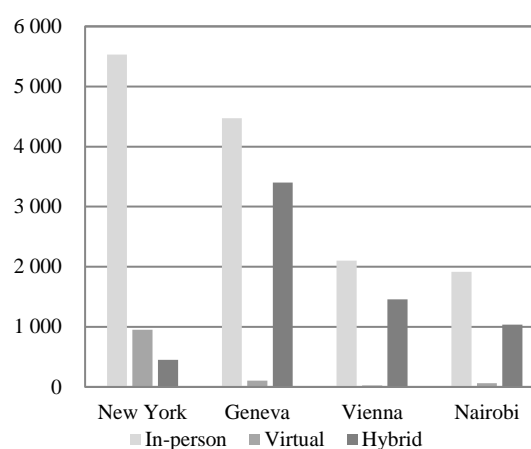
4. The Secretary-General provides information on the number of in-person, virtual and hybrid meetings held at each duty station in 2021 and 2022. The information, which is also reflected in figure II, shows that the proportion of in-person meetings increased noticeably in all four duty stations, whereas the proportion of hybrid meetings rose significantly in Geneva and Nairobi. According to the Secretary-General, the proportion of meetings held in either virtual or hybrid mode fell to 35 per cent from 66 per cent in 2021, reflecting the return to in-person meetings. As a result of the lifting of the restrictions in place in 2021, the proportion of meetings supported with interpretation increased by 38 per cent compared with 2021, while the proportion of meetings arranged without interpretation increased by 83 per cent (ibid., para. 9 and figure II). **The Advisory Committee notes the information on the number of meetings and the increase in the number of in-person meetings in 2022 at the four duty stations. The Committee trusts that similar information regarding the number of meetings and the increase in the number of in-person meetings, as well as on the impact of the changes in the number of meetings on the budget of the Department, will be provided in the next budget submission.**

Figure II
Formats of meetings held at the four main conference-servicing duty stations, in 2021 and 2022

A. 2021



B. 2022



5. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that, while continuing to provide conference services during the intervening period of the pandemic, at the same time, that period has also highlighted challenges and areas requiring clarification and guidance from Member States. These issues include:

(a) The provision of hybrid and virtual meetings requires a mandate from the General Assembly, along with approved legal parameters and technical requirements (see [A/77/7](#), para. 71), which includes the need to clarify how the rules of procedure would be applied in a formal meeting being held in hybrid or virtual format, the requirement of universal access to digital platforms to ensure equal participation by all Member States and the question of authentication of participants;

(b) Existing remote simultaneous interpretation platforms are not fully compliant with the standards set by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and do not fulfil all of the United Nations-specific requirements;

(c) The need to limit the duration of remote simultaneous interpretation to two hours and the number of assignments for interpreters per week to five in order to address potential health hazards, which is contrary to the original workload standard set by the General Assembly, according to which the workload of interpreters had been defined as seven (exceptionally eight) assignments per week of a three-hour duration;

(d) The persistence of many technical problems, such as sound compression, connectivity issues and the use of ill-adapted equipment by remote participants, which continue to have a negative bearing on the quality of sound that is paramount for the interpretation of the proceedings;

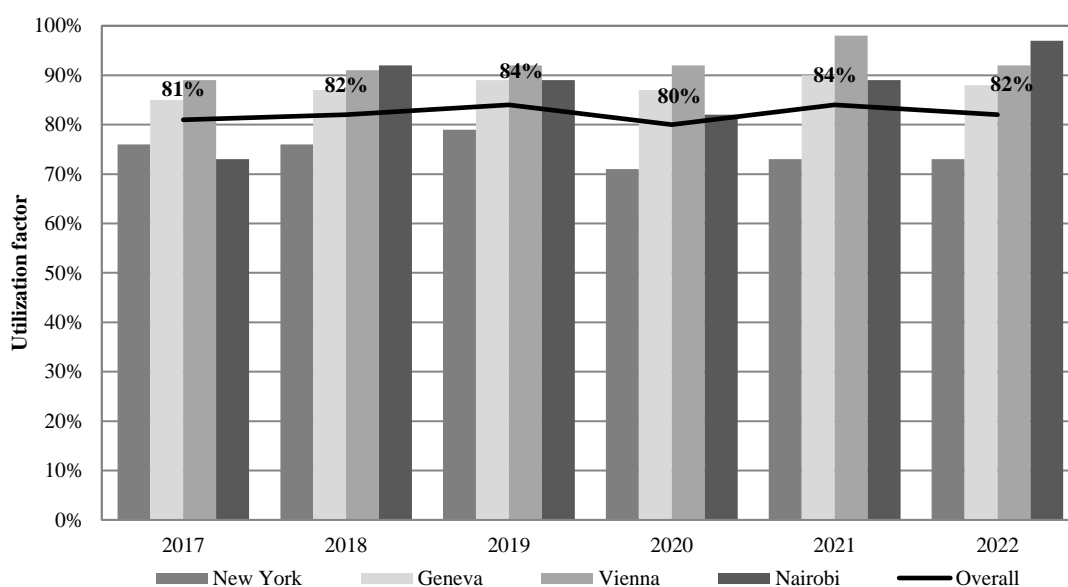
(e) The equipment required to provide support to virtual and hybrid meetings was purchased with funding released under exceptional measures taken to ensure business continuity, in March 2020. Should hybrid and virtual meetings be mandated as an established part of the format of the programme of meetings, then operationally there would be human resources, technical and cost implications to the budget submission by multiple departments that comprise the conferencing

ecosystem, as on-site, hybrid, and fully virtual meetings with interpretation require different amounts of human resource allocation (A/78/96, paras. 10–21).

6. As regards the utilization of conference-servicing resources by United Nations organs, the Secretary-General, in his report, indicates that all four duty stations continued efforts to optimize the interpretation utilization rate in accordance with the relevant provisions in resolutions of the General Assembly. The overall utilization rate in 2022 decreased, however, to 82 per cent, compared with 84 per cent in 2021, as shown in figure III. The report also includes information on the provision of interpretation services to bodies entitled to meet “as required”; at meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States; and to meetings held away from established headquarters, which shows a general increase in the provision of services to those types of meetings in 2022 compared with 2021 (*ibid.*, paras. 23–27 and figures III–VI). **The Advisory Committee notes the information on the interpretation utilization factor in the four duty stations, which shows a higher factor in Nairobi compared with other duty stations, and trusts that a clear explanation of the differences will be provided in the next report on the pattern of conferences.**

Figure III

Interpretation utilization factor of all calendar bodies, 2017–2022



7. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the average cost of in-person meetings of up to two days (a team of 14 interpreters) is \$11,300 in New York, \$13,000 in Geneva, \$11,700 in Vienna and \$17,200 in Nairobi. For meetings of a duration greater than two days (a team of 20 interpreters), the cost was \$16,100 for New York, \$18,400 for Geneva, \$16,700 for Vienna and \$25,800 for Nairobi. Meetings conducted in virtual or hybrid format continue to be costed on a case-by-case basis depending on the number of interpretation teams assigned. As the team is composed of interpreters at different professional levels, the chiefs of the interpretation services would use the most recent experience and determine an average composition of, for example, a team of 14 interpreters. When the conference services are booked, requesters are provided with estimated costs, which they can accept, or can subsequently revise their requests, such as modifying the services that they require or the duration of a meeting. According to the Secretary-

General, as virtual and hybrid meetings are not currently mandated by the General Assembly, rates for such meetings are not available. In addition, without advance knowledge of the exact number and parameters of such meetings, as well as the overall workload associated therewith, it is difficult to conduct capacity planning, such as projecting how many short-term interpreters would need to be hired to complement the core staffing table, as well as establishing the composition of the teams of interpreters. In order to determine standard rates for meetings in various formats, should the General Assembly decide on a new mandate for virtual and hybrid meetings, the methodology for costing in-person meetings would need to be expanded to incorporate all other support services and capacities, including commercial service providers of the platform, sound quality control services, verification and quality control and quality assurance services. The Advisory Committee requested, but was not provided with, clear information on the approximate costs that could have been saved had the cancellation of meetings been decided well in advance. **The Advisory Committee trusts that detailed information on the cancellation of meetings and the savings thereof will be provided in the next budget submission.**

III. Documents management

8. The Secretary-General indicates in his report that the overall compliance by author departments with the deadlines for submitting slotted documents for processing increased from 91 per cent in 2021 to 92 per cent in 2022. During the year, across the four duty stations, 99 per cent of documents (3,074 of a total of 3,117) submitted on time and within word limits were processed in a timely manner, compared with 98 per cent in 2021. The overall compliance with issuance deadlines rose from 92 per cent in 2021 to 94 per cent in 2022. Specifically, year on year, timely issuance increased from 92 per cent to 98 per cent in Vienna, owing to the prioritization of parliamentary documents that were submitted on time and within word limits, and from 93 per cent to 94 per cent in Geneva. New York was able to maintain timely issuance at 94 per cent, the same rate as in 2021. Timely issuance in Nairobi decreased from 79 per cent to 71 per cent, owing largely to departmental corrections being received while documents were in process. Furthermore, some language units in Nairobi continued to experience a vacancy rate of 33 per cent for most of the year, which had a serious impact on processing capacity. As regards the control of documents, the Secretary-General explains that the number of words submitted globally for translation increased to just over 243 million in 2022, from 219 million in 2021, representing an 11 per cent year-on-year increase. The proportion of documents submitted for processing within agreed word limits decreased slightly, however, from 93 per cent to 91 per cent (*ibid.*, paras. 33–38 and figures VII–XI).

Productivity

9. The throughput productivity of the translation services, or the total number of words processed divided by the staff days spent translating them, increased in 2022 across duty stations, except in Vienna. The Secretary-General includes information on productivity for the past five years (2018–2022) and explains that owing to further refinement of the methodology applicable to New York, the 2021 and 2022 figures, unlike previous years, do not include the additional workload generated by parallel processing, which is the practice of simultaneously editing and translating documents in order to minimize processing time. Parallel processing is used in New York because of time pressure and limited editorial capacity. If editorial changes were included, throughput productivity for New York in 2022 would be 7.6 pages

per staff member per day rather than the currently recorded 6.3 pages. In addition, the 2022 figures for New York and Nairobi do not include English translation because of the different nature of the work performed by staff in the English Translation and Editorial Service in New York and the English Language Unit in Nairobi (*ibid.*, para. 39 and table 2).

Digitization

10. Regarding the digitization and uploading of older documents, the Secretary-General explains that the Department of Global Communications presented to the Committee on Information at its forty-third session, in 2021, a new mass digitization and preservation project proposal prepared by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. The project would involve the preservation of 1 million documents issued during the period from 1946 to 1993 that are currently in deteriorating condition. The business case for the project includes outsourcing of the digitization and basic metadata creation to enable the preservation of the documents in the United Nations Digital Library and the Official Document System, and the upgrading of the digital platform of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library in line with current practices and international standards. A sum of \$10 million was requested to fund the project over a five-year period. The Department of Global Communications presented the business case and funding request to interested Member States and three foundations. It will continue to present the proposal to as many stakeholders as possible until a funding opportunity is identified (*ibid.*, para. 45). **The Advisory Committee again welcomes the efforts to digitize historic and older documents of the Organization and trusts that detailed information on the financial aspects of the costs of the project will be included in the context of the next budget submission (see [A/77/544](#), para. 15).**

IV. Staffing

11. Table 3 of the report of the Secretary-General includes vacancy rates in key occupational groups as at 31 December 2022. Language services continued to fill vacancies as expeditiously as possible while maintaining the required vacancy rate. Efforts to fill vacancies in Nairobi continued, resulting in the recruitment of one interpreter in early 2023 ([A/78/96](#), paras. 49–52 and table 3). **The Advisory Committee notes the efforts to fill vacancies and expects that efforts will continue to be made to ensure that all vacant posts are filled expeditiously.**

12. As for outreach activities, in his report, the Secretary-General explains the efforts made to reach out to language professionals, especially from Africa and from Latin America and the Caribbean, indicating that, overall, in 2022, 59 per cent of the estimated staff time spent on outreach at the four duty stations was targeted at language professionals from these two regions. Similarly, with respect to internships, the Secretary-General indicates in his report that, in 2022, the number of interns hosted by language services was still below pre-pandemic levels. Nonetheless, the number increased to 28, from 21 in 2021. Of those, 57 per cent were current students or recent graduates of partner universities. Efforts aimed at recruiting interns from Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean also continued, despite the challenges of the pandemic: 28.6 per cent of all interns hosted by United Nations language services in 2022 were nationals of Africa or Latin America and the Caribbean, the same proportion as in 2021. In addition to internships, United Nations language services continued to offer remote practicums to students enrolled in universities that have signed a remote practicum agreement with the Organization (*ibid.*, paras. 53–58). **The Advisory Committee notes the efforts made by the Secretary-General in terms of outreach activities to meet future staffing**

challenges and encourages him to strengthen such efforts (see [A/77/544, para. 18](#) and [A/76/506, para. 17](#)). The Committee will make further comments on vacancies and outreach activities in the context of its consideration of the reports of the Secretary-General on human resources management.

V. Improvements in language services and quality

13. According to the report of the Secretary-General, in 2021, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management completed a pilot to assess the quantity of reprise text (i.e. text previously translated in other documents) in the official documentation that it produces. In 2022, the data collected were analysed by an ad hoc task force created in the framework of the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications, which led to the adoption of a new definition of reprise. Adjusting productivity expectations or reducing credit according to the quantity of reprise is standard practice in the translation industry; nonetheless, the reduction of credit was temporarily halted for language staff in 2021 and 2022 to facilitate the implementation of the new workload standards, taking into account the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on staff. Reinstating the reduction of credit was implemented in July 2023, as planned. To support translators in achieving the new workload standards while producing work of the highest quality, new learning and continuous development programmes were established in New York and Geneva, where about 90 per cent of the Department's translators, revisers and editors work. In addition, a new translation quality management framework developed by all four duty stations was adopted in November 2022. A new standard operating procedure on quality management of contractual self-revised translation, for implementation at all duty stations, was also developed in 2022. The Advisory Committee makes comments on this matter in its first report on the programme budget for 2024 (see [A/78/7, para. I.100](#)).

14. To monitor the level of satisfaction of Member States with the quality of the conference services, the Secretary-General indicates in his report that the Secretariat collects feedback through annual informational meetings held at the four duty stations, ad hoc surveys and the global e-survey that is available throughout the year in the official languages. There were 113 responses to the global survey, compared with 141 in 2021, with 82 per cent of respondents rating the conference services provided as either "good" or "very good" in 2022, a decrease from 89 per cent in 2021. In New York, the 12 respondents to a survey of Bureau members of the Main Committees rated the overall quality of the assistance provided by secretariats as "good" or "very good". In Geneva, 89 per cent of respondents to a local survey rated conference services there as "good" or "very good" overall in 2022. In Vienna, the Conference Management Service received 68 letters of appreciation from clients in 2022. Finally, in Nairobi, where local surveys are regularly conducted, 89 per cent of surveyed delegates rated the conference services provided as excellent, good, or satisfactory (*ibid.*, paras. 59–69).

VI. Accessibility

15. In his report, the Secretary-General provides details of efforts to respond to the accessibility needs of delegates and other users of conference services and to raise awareness of accessibility issues. For example, in 2022, 47 meetings were serviced in New York with remote sign language interpretation, a slight decrease from 55 in 2021, and live captioning was provided for 162 meetings, compared with 113 in 2021. In Geneva, 96 meetings were provided with sign language interpretation, a

significant increase from 62 in 2021, and 191 meetings were provided with live captioning, compared with 113 in 2021. In Vienna, a digital magnifier for persons with vision impairment was introduced in 2022, and three portable audio systems were made available for persons with hearing impairment. Nairobi endeavours to provide meetings with sign language interpretation whenever requested. Accessibility is being taken into account in the renovation of the conference facilities that is currently under way (*ibid.*, paras. 70–73).

16. Upon enquiry regarding the costs of the provision of assistive devices and Braille printing, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in New York, a stock of assistive devices was donated by the Republic of Korea in 2013 as an in-kind contribution to support the operations of the Accessibility Centre. The stock was upgraded in 2016. In 2022, there was no expenditure on additional assistive devices. In Vienna, an amount of 25,587.42 euros was spent on assistive devices to support meeting participants in 2022. The funds were donated by the Permanent Mission of Thailand to the United Nations (Vienna) in 2021. In Geneva and Nairobi, there are no assistive devices. As for Braille printing, as seen in table 2, in New York, the Braille printer purchased in January 2016 is currently in use. Associated costs in 2022 were to upgrade the Braille software, at a cost of \$455, and annual paper costs in the amount of \$950. A total of 2,668 pages in Braille were produced in 2022. Geneva produced 10 parliamentary documents for a total of 398 pages in Braille, all for the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in English and Spanish. For Braille printing, three Braille printers purchased in 2010 are currently in use. Associated costs in 2022 were annual paper costs in the amount of \$93. Vienna and Nairobi do not provide this service.

Table 2
Braille printing output in New York and Geneva, 2022

<i>Language</i>	<i>Pages in Word</i>	<i>Pages in Braille</i>	<i>Page impressions in Braille</i>
New York			
Arabic	132	396	2 580
Chinese	132	396	1 476
English	233	688	4 565
French	132	396	2 580
Russian	132	396	2 028
Spanish	132	396	2 580
Total, New York	893	2 668	15 809
Geneva			
Arabic	0	0	0
Chinese	0	0	0
English	51	313	758
French	0	0	0
Russian	0	0	0
Spanish	12	85	170
Total, Geneva	63	398	928

17. As regards sign language, upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the World Federation of the Deaf, representing various national chapters, has been consistently advocating the use of International Sign as a means

of achieving accessibility at international events, similar to the use of International Sign at their own congresses, Deaflympics and other events. International Sign is used as part of broadcasts on United Nations media platforms that can be streamed by audiences around the world. According to the Federation, International Sign is not a true language, in the sense that it does not always convey the richness of meaning that can be expressed in a full language, nor is it as efficient as a natural language. Nevertheless, International Sign has evolved over the past century to serve deaf persons who have become more active at the international level. It has been used when there is no option to provide interpreting services in every national sign language represented at a meeting, and it has proven very effective when participants from different countries meet at conferences for which the vocabulary has become conventionalized. In 2022, 37 meetings held in New York were provided with International Sign interpretation. In Geneva, International Sign interpretation was provided and in addition, interpretation in national sign languages was provided for some Member States on a cost-recovery basis. Sign language interpretation is not provided in Vienna and Nairobi. Table 3 provides information on the gross and net costs of the services in both New York and Geneva.

Table 3
Costs of sign language interpretation in New York and Geneva, 2022

<i>Duty station</i>	<i>Total staff</i>	<i>Total days</i>	<i>Daily gross rate (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Total gross (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Daily net rate (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Total net (United States dollars)</i>
New York						
Regular budget	8	21	731	15 351	630	13 230
Extrabudgetary resources	10	109	731	79 679	630	68 670
Total, New York	11^a	130	731	95 030	630	81 900
Geneva						
Regular budget	32	195	731	142 545	630	122 850
Extrabudgetary resources	15	95	731	69 445	630	59 850
Total, Geneva	32	290	731	211 990	630	182 700

^a Total staff on when-actually-employed contract onboarded in New York in 2022 for sign language interpretation. A staff member appointed on a when-actually-employed contract can service regular budget and extrabudgetary meetings within the same contract period.

18. The Advisory Committee again acknowledges the continuous efforts of the Secretary-General regarding accessibility, recalls its previous comments and recommendations on accessibility (see [A/75/565](#), para. 18, [A/74/538](#), para. 25, [A/74/7](#), paras. I.67–I.68, and [A/73/458](#), paras. 20–21) and encourages the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to ensure accessibility of all individuals (see [A/76/506](#), para. 20).

19. The Committee recommends that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to provide, in his next report on the pattern of conferences, detailed information on the sign language services provided by the United Nations, including the number of persons benefiting from those services, and a comparison with the services provided to similar organizations elsewhere, along with an explanation of the reasons for any variance in the provision of such services.

VII. Conclusion

20. In paragraph 81 of his report, the Secretary-General recommends that the General Assembly (a) take note of the report; and (b) request the Secretary-General to present future calendars on an annual basis, in line with resolution [77/267](#), by which the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue with the submission of the programme budget according to an annual cycle. **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.**
