

UNITED NATIONS



REPORT OF THE SIXTH CONFERENCE
OF MOU UNIVERSITIES

Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey (California, United States of America)
2-3 May 2019

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1. On 2 and 3 May 2019, the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey hosted the sixth conference of the network of universities¹ that had signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the United Nations on cooperation in preparing candidates for language competitive examinations.
 2. The conference aims to bring together representatives of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the MoU universities² in order to:
 - (a) Review collaboration within the MoU community and suggest new approaches so as to continually strengthen and improve the network of MoU universities;
 - (b) Provide an opportunity for partners within the MoU network to compare initiatives and methods in the fields of language professional training, training of trainers, outreach and communication for training programmes, joint training activities and other related projects, and to synthesize those efforts where possible;

4. A total of 53 registered participants attended the conference in person (see annexes II and III to the present report):

- (a) 34 representatives of 18 MoU universities and 3 remote practicum agreement³ universities, located in 13 countries;
- (b) 19 representatives of the four United Nations Headquarters duty stations and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).⁴

5. In accordance with the recommendations made at the third MoU conference, DGACM representatives reported on the pedagogical assistance provided by United Nations staff at the four Headquarters

participants in the conference, and a reception on 3 May for all participants in the Monterey Forum (held on 4 and 5 May at the Middlebury Institute) and the conference.

7. The conference was conducted in five of the six official languages of the United Nations. With the assistance of its interpretation students,

MoUs continued to diversify. In accordance with the recommendation from the fifth conference, remote activities had complemented rather than replaced face-to-face activities. She updated participants on the modalities of the language competitive examinations, which were proving effective in securing applications from the most suitable candidates. She then presented new forms of collaborative arrangements with universities, which were intended to support specific succession-planning needs and achieve greater diversity in language services. Such arrangements included remote practicum agreements, which had been signed by eight universities, including three MoU universities, and associated membership agreements, the first of which was expected to be signed with Belgrano University on the margins of the conference. In concluding, she invited MoU university representatives and United Nations staff to avail themselves of the opportunity afforded by the conference to exchange views on the outreach programme.

2. UPDATE ON MoU NETWORK ACTIVITIES

13. Two presentations were delivered under the agenda item. The first was given by Carole Maisonneuve, Public Information and Multilingualism Officer in the Office of the Under-Secretary-

second was by Renée Jourdenais, Professor at the Middlebury Institute and Coordinator of the conference, and examined qualitative data from the university perspective.

14. Ms. Maisonneuve, addressing the conference in French, noted an increase of 26.9 per cent in the number of interns hosted by United Nations language services between 2017 and 2018. MoU university students or graduates consistently accounted for more than 75 per cent of all interns hosted, and the figure had continued to rise over the

for interpretation in DGACM in New York, then delivered a presentation on competitive examinations for interpreters.

21. Ms. Lafeber, addressing the conference in English, presented the changes introduced in the examinations for language posts since 2017. The examinations were being conducted fully remotely, supporting increased test accessibility and validity, andw York,

described the selection process, from pre-screening to the administration of the examination itself to interviews. The examination was conducted anonymously. Examination centres were opened at the four Headquarters duty stations and other select locations on the basis of the presence or proximity of applicants.

27. She presented the success rates for the past six competitive examinations for interpreters,⁷ which ranged from 1.5 per cent for the Chinese examination to nearly 20 per cent for the Russian examination. The discrepancies were the result of various factors. She also described the challenges faced by applicants during examinations. The primary challenge was the speed of delivery, which averaged 149 words per minute. Additional factors included the diversity of accents and registers in use and the variety of subject matter covered. She indicated that the feasibility of administering the examination remotely in the future was being assessed in a pilot project.

28. In the ensuing discussion, Harry Dai, Deputy Dean of the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation at Shanghai International Studies University, expressed concern that the increasing number of applicants for the Chinese interpretation examination did not appear to translate in terms of the number of rostered candidates. Recalling examples of qualified graduates

language of education, which had resulted in suitable candidates from South-East Asia being screened out.

33. Noting that more than 3,000 applications had been received for the most recent Chinese translation examination, Ms. Lafeber stated that the matter would be brought to the attention of the Office of Human Resources at the United Nations.

4. PREPARING STUDENTS FOR UNITED NATIONS EXAMINATIONS

34. Alexandre Skourikhine, Senior Reviser in the Russian Translation Section at the United Nations Office at Geneva and MoU Coordinator for translation for Lomonosov Moscow State University, delivered a presentation on the way in which students were trained for competitive examinations relating to the documentation chain, while Sheila Shermet, Senior Interpreter in the English Interpretation Section in DGACM in New York and MoU Coordinator for interpretation for the Middlebury Institute, presented an analysis of successful candidates in United Nations interpretation examinations and the reasons for their success.

35. Mr. Skourikhine, addressing the conference in Russian, gave an introduction on outreach activities conducted by his section in recent years to prepare students for the examinations. Such activities had been delivered either on-site or remotely and included sight translation, group translation, translation assignments with individual feedback, classes on research methods for translation, and analysis of mock examinations. Mock examinations were particularly effective in preparing students not only technically but also psychologically and helping them to identify the most relevant online resources and computer-assisted translation tools for the purpose of the examination. When reviewing assignments, trainers assessed the following criteria in particular:

- (a) Accuracy of the translation: no mistranslations, no omissions, no unnecessary additions, no shifts of emphasis;
- (b) Rules of the target language: for example, spelling, hyphenation, spacing, typos, punctuation, grammar, syntax;
- (c) Terminology: use of the same terminology throughout the text, with the recognition that the same word could be translated in different ways in the United Nations;
- (d) Style: adjustment to United Nations style, which might vary considerably between documents;
- (e) Functional criteria: technical non-linguistic errors.

36. He also presented some tips shared with participants by his section during training sessions and some final thoughts on the outcome of those outreach efforts for students, for MoU universities and their faculty and for the United Nations.

37. Sheila Shermet, addressing the conference in English, gave a presentation explaining why interpretation candidates failed United Nations examinations. Basing her analysis on her practical experience as a United Nations interpreter, a former interpretation school faculty member, a marker of competitive examinations and freelance tests, and a trainer for MoU university students, she highlighted gaps in training and ways to improve candidate performance. She claimed that, just as “clear passes” in

responded that it was currently intended to support the training of translation students but could be expanded to other disciplines in the future. Nicole Maguire, Chief of the English Translation Section at the United Nations Office at Geneva, stated that the Office had already classified its texts according to level of difficulty, and that they could be shared as a contribution to the toolkit.

43. Patricia Meehan, Secretary of International Relations at the National University of Córdoba, welcomed that initiative and asked whether it would be supplemented with feedback from the United Nations after the roll-out date in order to assist universities in determining whether they were on track. Ms. Álvarez responded that feedback would be encouraged during the conception phase in particular. The Documentation Division would assess whether feedback could also be accommodated after the launch of the toolkit.

44. Daniel Linder, Associate Professor at the University of Salamanca, indicated that his university was already running a similar programme. He offered to share its content with the United Nations and invited other MoU universities to do the same, where applicable. Ms. Shermet recommended that the resources be classified by origin or duty station and by topic, in addition to difficulty level. Steven Wonnacott, Teaching Fellow at the University of Bath, also underlined the benefit of making such resources easily accessible by language. Irina Shokina, Head of the Department for International Cooperation and Internationalization at Moscow State Linguistic University, suggested including information on assessment criteria in the toolkit. All the comments were duly noted by Ms. Álvarez.

6. PRÉCIS-WRITING AT THE UNITED NATIONS

45. Ita Wardell, Senior Reviser with the English Translation and Editorial Service of the Documentation Division in DGACM in New York, and Nicole Maguire, Chief of the English Translation Section at the United Nations Office at Geneva, delivered a joint presentation in English on the importance of précis-writing at the United Nations. After defining précis-writing, they explained that summary records, which were produced by précis-writers, were official documents that constituted the permanent records of the relevant United Nations bodies. By providing a clear, concise and accurate picture of the proceedings, the records also helped to document how decisions were taken and served as the institutional memory of the Organization. In addition, they were used as reference documents to facilitate the in-session work of committees and enable those unable to attend a meeting to be better informed about the issues discussed and decisions taken. The presenters provided further information about the bodies in Geneva and New York that were entitled to summary records and gave details of the practical steps taken by précis-writers before, during and after meetings to complete their assignments. They also shared resources useful for training language professionals in précis-writing, such as the United Nations Editorial Manual,⁸ the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, the digital recordings portal of the United Nations Office at Geneva,⁹ and the United Nations Library of Geneva.¹⁰

46. During the discussion, Changshuan Li of Beijing Foreign Studies University asked about the recurring use of the passive voice in précis-writing, which made translation into other languages difficult. Ms. Wardell responded that concordance among language versions was guaranteed through meetings with representatives of three to four language sections. Ms. Meehan of the National University of Córdoba asked whether summary records were produced only in English. In response, it was indicated that all summary records were first drafted in English in New York, while in Geneva around 10 per cent were initially drafted in French. Alexa Alfer of the University of Westminster acknowledged that universities were facing difficulties in training language professionals to undertake précis-writing and enquired about the training process for new recruits to the United Nations. Ms. Maguire responded with further details of the skills required to serve as a précis-writer and the steps taken by new recruits to meet the standards. Recalling that précis-writing was included in the competitive examinations, she expressed regret that some qualified translation candidates failed the examination owing to inadequate training or understanding of the specificities of précis-writing.

7. THE IMPORTANCE OF EDITING SKILLS

47. Sarah Scott, Editor with the Editorial Control Unit of the Publishing and Library Section at the United Nations Office at Vienna, delivered a presentation in English on the importance of editing skills, explaining what editing skills were, why they were important and how they could be incorporated into the curriculum. Editors at the United Nations undertook various tasks, such as correcting grammar, punctuation, capitalization and spelling, ensuring that terminology was accurate, checking dates, names and titles, ensuring that texts were understandable and translatable, resolving ambiguities and editing

55. To better support remote training, Angelique Antonova, Deputy Director of the School of Interpretation and Translation at Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, suggested exploring videoconferencing options to avoid technical difficulties in the future. Such technical issues were particularly detrimental in view of the time difference between Moscow and New York, which reduced the effectiveness of the time spent on training. She also noted that the practice whereby MoU universities were consulted before the designation of an MoU coordinator had been discontinued. In response, Ms. Maisonneuve indicated that the United Nations outreach mechanism had been revised in 2018 and that coordinators were being asked to serve for a maximum of five years. Under the new mechanism, coordinators were nominated unanimously by the four Headquarters duty stations and appointed thereafter by the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management. They were generally former graduates or teachers from the MoU university under consideration and regarded by the nominating parties as best positioned to coordinate the cooperation with the university. She underscored that the role of the coordinators had evolved under the new mechanism. It was also important to ensure that coordinators wishing to step down could be replaced.

University had become less frequent over the previous five years. He suggested taking advantage of home leave to pay regular visits to MoU universities, which would be relatively inexpensive and could be made mandatory. He also proposed exploring options for universities to support the cost implications. He also asked whether access to the interpretation booths in New York could be provided to MoU universities. Responding, Patricia Meehan noted the excellent cooperation with the MoU coordinator for translation, who visited her university whenever in the region, but acknowledged that it might be challenging for coordinators to manage the responsibilities of their role in addition to their regular duties. Jayne Mutiga, Director of the Centre for Translation and Interpretation at the University of Nairobi, suggested reducing turnover among coordinators and decreasing the duration of vacancies between their tenures to ensure the smooth implementation of outreach plans. She also noted that a heavy workload had recently prevented staff of the United Nations Office at Nairobi from visiting the University of Nairobi as regularly as in the past. On the United Nations side, Ms. Diur suggested that universities appoint two university focal points for interpretation and the documentation chain, respectively, to serve as liaisons with the United Nations.

9. IMPLEMENTING THE MOUS: UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVES

increasingly used United Nations resources, such as the Spanish Translation Service blog,¹¹ UNTERM¹² and the

increasing interest among the students in pursuing such a career. She suggested that the activities be annualized for greater impact so that every class received the same exposure to the United Nations.

10. USING UNITED NATIONS MATERIAL IN INTERPRETER TRAINING: WHICH, WHEN, HOW AND HOW MUCH?

67. Moderated by Cas Shulman-Mora of the Middlebury Institute, the session included presentations by United Nations staff

could be introduced at any point of the training process. It was preferable to begin with easier speeches and then introduce more complex content, for example on regional issues, that was delivered at higher speed or covered a wide array of accents. In concluding, he stressed the importance of practice for students to achieve a higher degree of automaticity.

70. Yao Bin, addressing the conference in Chinese, gave a presentation on how United Nations materials had been used at Beijing Foreign Studies University since 1973, shortly after Chinese had been made a working language of the General Assembly. He also provided background information on training programmes

tutoring, in-person contacts were best to develop trust, support examination preparation and build group dynamics.

85. Natalia Kobleva, addressing the conference in English, presented the experience of the Russian Translation Service in New York in conducting remote training with a university under a remote practicum agreement. The remote training began in the second semester of the programme, when students had received sufficient foundational training. It consisted of groups of eight students of both translation and interpretation, preselected by the university on the basis of their qualifications and motivation. They participated in one three-hour session every two weeks. Some of the sessions were lectures, while others were practical, with translation assignments sent by email. There were many advantages to that approach. For example, there were no budgetary implications, the United Nations could reach students anywhere, students did not miss sessions even when travelling because they could participate in the programme from anywhere, and sessions could be recorded to support institutional memory. In terms of disadvantages, it was difficult to build rapport with participants in the absence of any visit to the university, problematic for United Nations trainers to stay on track of weekly homework with eight participants and challenging to maintain contact with former participants. Technical difficulties were also observed at times. In concluding, she suggested strengthening interactions with university staff and encouraging them to keep records of the assignments and exercises given to their students. Feedback from faculty members was also welcomed to continue

institutions. The University of Geneva had adapted its programmes in 2014 by reflecting new trends in the field, improving high-value skills, maintaining excellent placement rates of its graduates and contributing to innovation by connecting training, professional practice and research. The master of arts in specialized translation was focused on legal and institutional translation and on economic and financial translation, while the master of arts in translation and technology was focused on machine translation and other information technology tools, and the master of arts in translation and specialized multilingual communication covered versatile fields of work such as transcreation, localization and specialized writing. The university's cooperation with the United Nations also reflected these new trends, with a focus on comparative law for translators and interpreters, post-editing,

15. CLOSING

96. During the closing segment, Ms. Pollard congratulated all participants, in particular those from the hosting Middlebury Institute, on the results achieved and invited MoU universities to participate in the seventh conference, to be held in 2021 at a United Nations duty station to be confirmed after internal consultations were completed.

97. Renée Jourdenais officially closed the conference and invited all participants to attend the opening reception of the Monterey Forum.

The members of the MoU network agree to the following:

On competitive examinations for language posts:

- < They welcome the increasing use of social media and direct communications with MoU universities to promote competitive examinations for language posts
- < They take note of the request for feedback on the results of competitive examinations and agree to explore the possibility of providing information on levels of performance
- < They note with interest that options are being explored to use remote testing in United Nations examinations for interpreters

On training:

- < They reiterate the importance of training prospective language professionals in speed-coping techniques in both translation and interpreting in order to increase success rates in competitive examinations
- < They emphasize the need for practice by interpretation students to achieve the automaticity required to succeed in examinations
- <

- < They welcome the growing use of remote training as a complement to, and not a substitute for, face-to-face outreach activities
- <

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