

Languages Service Sectoral Assembly (LSSA)

Minutes of the fourth meeting of the Bureau*

Held via videoconference on Monday, 6 September 2021, from 2.30 p.m. to 3.15 p.m.

Attendees: Marine Acker (FTS), Anthony Alioto (ES), Asma Belfalah (ATS), Pauline Escalante (EDPU), Pablo González Silva (STS), Laura Johnson (President), Kristina Redesha (RTS) and Verónica Sainz Goutard (STS)

Main topics discussed:

- Management had expressed concerns about the wording contained in the LSSA programme of work, namely that it contained a claim that eLUNa was unsatisfactory for the needs of Arabic translators. It was clarified during the Bureau meeting that the wording in the programme of work was not intended to suggest that eLUNa did not work at all, but rather that there were challenges. It was also pointed out that the role of the LSSA was to represent the opinions of staff, and not those of management.

- The **President** had sent a query to the Director of DCM in her capacity as focal point for multilingualism regarding the use of special assignments (SPA) for staff to attend language classes. The **Director** had replied (see annex).

- It was agreed to continue the discussion on a unified approach to recording SPA at the next Bureau meeting.

- The **President** would be coordinating with staff from New York, Vienna and Nairobi to help refine the draft questions on the impact on staff of the new workload standard.

- It was agreed to begin the second part of the meeting (with the **Chief of LS** and the **Director of DCM**) by reminding the management side that LSSA Bureau members are there to reflect the concerns passed onto them by staff, not their own opinions, and that any disputes should be resolved through the President as stated in the footnote to the minutes of each meeting.

* Unless otherwise stated, the opinions reflected herein represent staff suggestions and views collected by their representatives and are aimed at promoting communication between management and staff. In order to avoid misunderstandings, any comments or requests for corrections to the minutes should be submitted to the President of the LSSA only, for inclusion in the minutes of the following meeting.

Languages Service Sectoral Assembly (LSSA)

Minutes of the meeting of the Bureau with the Chief of LS and Director of DCM on 6 September 2021*

Held via videoconference on Monday, 6 September 2021, from 3.15 p.m. to 4.30 p.m.

Attendees: Marine Acker (FTS), Anna Aleksandrova (RS), Anthony Alioto (ES), Asma Belfalah (ATS), Pauline Escalante (EDPU), Pablo González Silva (STS), Laura Johnson (President), Michelle Keating (Chief of LS), Kira Kruglikova (Director of DCM) and Verónica Sainz Goutard (STS)

The meeting was held in question and answer format.

Question: The **President** asked why she was no longer invited to the weekly meetings of the Chiefs.

Answer: The **Chief of LS** said that no meetings had taken place over the summer. The invitations would resume shortly.

Question: A **Bureau** member asked what was known about the arrangements for return to the office?

Answer. The **Chief of LS** said that there were no immediate plans to make changes to the current alternate working arrangements. After they were lifted, she expected that the vast majority of staff would request to work from home for at least 1 to 3 days.

The **Director of DCM** said that that she suspected that staff would not be required to come in for at least the rest of the year and possibly into 2022. A return to the office should be done deliberately, meaning that it was important to think about the purpose of physical presence and why it was important. One idea was that a department might propose that all staff be in on the same day every so often to keep a sense of team cohesion.

Question: A **Bureau member** asked whether the previous arrangement in LS requiring on-site presence on Thursdays would be resumed.

Answer: The **Chief of LS** said that the historical reason for that arrangement was to allow for last-minute meetings and spontaneous contact. Without such interactions, staff missed out on development opportunities; this had often been a particular issue for women in the past. However, if staff were in the Palais but stayed in their offices with the doors closed, there was not much point requiring them to come in. There were no plans to revive the arrangement of on-site presence every Thursday.

Question: A **Bureau member** asked for further clarification about the use of special assignments, particularly for language classes in the context of multilingualism.

Answer: The **Chief of LS** said that where there was a business need for a staff member to learn a language, special assignments would be granted (for the time spent in classes, not homework). Staff members should discuss the matter with their chiefs beforehand. If there was no business need, staff would have to make up the time spent in language classes. Section chiefs had some latitude to make section-level policy decisions on SPA according to the specific needs of their

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section. For example, if output was very high, it was less important to be strict about the specific percentage of SPA per staff member.

Question: A **Bureau member** enquired about the budget for 2022 and whether there were any specific concerns that might affect DGACM.

Answer: The **Director of DCM** said that no major changes were expected, although the possibility that Member States would cut the budget or change the vacancy rate unexpectedly could never be completely ruled out.

Question: A **Bureau member** passed on concerns expressed by staff about the calculation of productivity for editors working in Arabic, given that documents in Arabic typically had 13 per cent fewer words in comparison with the equivalent English document.

Answer: The **Chief of LS** said that management had been aware of the issue for decades and took it into account when interpreting productivity figures for affected staff. However, the way in which productivity was reported to member States could not be changed without their approval.

Question: Several **Bureau members** raised concerns about the effect of the lower average wordcount in languages such as Arabic and Russian on productivity when translating from those source languages and asked how the workload could be reflected fairly. They felt that staff should not be disincentivized from translating from any of the Organization's official languages.

Answer: The **Chief of LS** said that there was no easy solution to this problem and invited any staff with workable proposals to submit them for consideration. Programming officers played a key role in job distribution and could help resolve the issue by ensuring a balance of more and less time-consuming assignments. Regarding the possibility of granting SPA to colleagues working from Arabic, Chinese or Russian on a service-wide basis, the Chief of LS suggested that the Chiefs of Section might not want this and might prefer instead to solve the problem by sending Arabic, Chinese and Russian texts to the Contractual Unit and devote their SPA credit to other tasks. The **Director of DCM** noted that even if that approach was adopted, at least some in-house capacity in each language would be required for quality control.

Query sent by the LSSA President

I am writing to you as UNOG Focal Point for Multilingualism at the request of the LSSA Bureau to pass on concerns about staff participation in language classes.

Our understanding of the policy applied in the Languages Service is that translators may only claim the time spent attending language classes as Special Assignments if their section needs more translation capacity in that language.

In addition, some staff reported being informally discouraged from taking language classes even on the understanding that it would not count as a Special Assignment.

Multilingualism is a core value of the Organization and many LS staff members are ready to “continue to actively use existing training facilities to acquire and enhance their proficiency in one or more of the official languages of the United Nations”, as they are regularly encouraged to do in the General Assembly’s resolutions on the subject (most recently A/RES/73/346).

I would appreciate clarification on the multilingualism policy as it applies to Languages Service staff. Are they also encouraged to acquire another official language?

Reply from the Director

Regarding your question about whether staff in LS are encouraged to acquire another official language, staff in LS may pursue another language, just like others in DCM and across the organization. As noted in paragraph 11 a of ST/IC/Geneva/2020/5, staff need their supervisor’s authorization to take language lessons. Paragraph 34 encourages managers approve requests to participate in classes and grant them time to get to and from the classes. It also notes that managers may request staff to make up the time spent away from their regular duties. I feel these aspects are pretty clear and I support managers authorizing staff to take classes with the understanding that staff will keep up with their regular work. For instance, I had my French conversation class today in the middle of the afternoon and am catching up on work this evening.

Your understanding of the specific policy for professional staff in LS is correct. If the Chief of Section establishes that there is a business need for the specific language and the Chief and the translator agree to pursue a language training program, special assignments would be granted to cover the time in language training. In this case, the goal to achieve proficiency in a specific language would be recorded in the performance document and there is an expectation that after several years the colleague would translate from that language. Such staff may also receive SLWP using USTS days to take additional training to support their acquisition of the languages skills. They will also usually receive special assignment credit during the first couple of years of training in the language.

I am not aware of the situation of staff being discouraged to take language lessons, as you note below. It would be helpful to know more.

A/RES/73/346 repeatedly mentions the principles of innovation and cost neutrality. Staff can contribute to multilingualism in many ways beyond learning a new language. For example, we are always looking for volunteers to work on organizing language day celebrations. Other ideas include joining the Multilingualism Action Team (MAT), becoming a multilingualism

champion, mentioning multilingualism in their signature, using official and working languages in meetings and in correspondence, volunteering to go on a cross-assignment to UNIS or through Connecta, creating audio content for videos, and promoting the United Nations in social media in different languages. If you or Sectoral Assembly colleagues have other suggestions, please let me know.