



United Nations

LTP, LCP AND LP JOINT PROJECT
HARMONIZE LANGUAGE LEARNING
AND ASSESSMENT STANDARDS
WITH A VIEW TOWARDS FUTURE HARMONIZATION
WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS GLOBAL SECRETARIAT

TERMS of REFERENCE

for the HARMONIZATION of LANGUAGE LEARNING and ASSESSMENT
throughout the United Nations Global Secretariat
Version: March 2018

Terms of Reference (TOR)

Name of the Project: Language Harmonization Project

The Language Harmonization Project at the United Nations is a project initiated in 2017, which aims to harmonize language learning and assessment for Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish, and for local working languages, within the United Nations Global Secretariat.

Mission and Vision

With the vision of promoting multilingualism in the United Nations system, the mission of the Language Harmonization Project is to create a common UN Language Framework for organizing language learning and assessment. This UN Language Framework will provide consistency in all United Nations language programmes while remaining flexible enough to be adapted to local contexts. As a result, the new framework will facilitate more efficient management of language programmes, stronger recognition of language skills, and smoother transitions in career mobility and development.

Scope

The harmonization project focuses on the regular/level courses in any version or format (face-to-face, online, blended, etc.) in all duty stations of the United Nations Global Secretariat offering language training. However, the harmonization project may also affect some courses currently considered as specialized courses.

The aims that define its scope are to:

- determine with precision what can be expected and/or achieved in terms of standardization, and what will remain flexible in the different language programmes and/or each duty station.
- define the new UN Language Framework, unique to our international and multilingual organization, including four UN Levels of Language Competence, equally valid for the six languages.
- define the Working Language Proficiency (WLP) level for any UN staff member as the backbone to renewing the Language Proficiency Examination (LPE) and benchmarking it at UN Level III.
- specify the main common guidelines of language learning and assessment:
 - curriculum (one common)
 - course programme (six - one for each language)
 - course description (as many as needed)

The project has intangible added benefits:

- develop and strengthen collaborative working habits among the language programmes across the United Nations
- break silos across language training programmes at the United Nations Secretariat
- promote the acknowledgment of language skills and knowledge at the United Nations, and promote multilingualism among staff members

Objectives and strategies

The Language Harmonization Project has defined the following four objectives:

- To foster collaboration between the Secretariat language programmes
- To standardize language programmes - while allowing flexibility - with common tools, such as curriculum, course programmes and course descriptions
- To define four UN Language Levels - the UN Language Framework - including their core contents and final assessments
- To officialize UN Level III - Working Language Proficiency (WLP) - as the basis of a revised Language Proficiency Examination (LPE)

In order to achieve its objectives, the Harmonization Working Group (WG) sets the following strategies:

- Use a common nomenclature: Find a common understanding among the LTP (UNOG), LCP (UNHQ) and LP (UNON), and define the terms used in the Language Harmonization Project.
- Collaborate, and share examples of LTP/LCP/LP documents that have already been created and match the definitions.
- Compare, analyse, select, and generate documents and best practices that enable the harmonization of language programmes.
- Foster dialogue and collaboration among the LTP/LCP/LP and, as the project advances, include language programmes in other duty stations along with focal points for multilingualism.

Harmonization Working Group: Composition, work and decision processes

The Heads of the language programmes in New York and Geneva have created a Working Group (WG) to achieve these objectives. It was initially composed of staff members from the LTP in Geneva, the LCP in New York and later joined by LP personnel in Nairobi. As the project expands, other representatives (staff members and consultants) from various locations can be included and contribute to the project. External experts or consultants are hired to work on specific duties.

The whole WG is expected to meet on a regular basis through online tools such as Skype or appear.in, to work on the project objectives. Smaller focus groups work on specific deliverables,

such as presentations, communications and reports. The project is hosted on Trello, a software programme for project management.

The Heads of the programmes and the WG also collaborate with other United Nations Departments that have a stake in the project, such as DGACM, ETS, etc.

With regard to the decision-making process, the WG makes proposals to colleagues in the language programmes, who in turn meet, discuss and come to consensus. The Heads of the language programmes give their approval and take decisions. Senior Management steers the project.

Internal communication

The WG shares information, proposals, frameworks and drafts with its colleagues in the Secretariat through four main communication tools:

- E-mail for short announcements, such as future meetings or surveys
- Surveys to solicit input from different stakeholders (language programme teachers, administrators, coordinators, managers; learning managers and multilingualism focal points; staff at large)
- Newsletters for more detailed updates about past events, decisions and processes
- Team meetings and workshops for the three language programmes involved at the present stage of the project

Achievements

List of achievements as of February 2018:

- Common Glossary of Terms UN Language Programmes (February 2018)
- Draft definition of Working Language Proficiency (WLP) (February 2018)
- Survey results on the draft definition of the WLP level (February 2018)
- Definition and naming of the UN Language Framework, the draft definition for the four UN Levels and their descriptors (overall and specific) (February 2018)
- Collaboration exercise: A guided exchange between the language teams in Geneva, Nairobi and New York, resulting in:
 - comparative models of the current regular courses (April-November 2017)
 - several compilation reports (December 2017)
- Three internal newsletters released (latest one in February 2018)
- Several meetings and workshops for the language programme teams in Geneva, Nairobi and New York

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can the name Language Proficiency Exam (LPE) change?

The mandate of the United Nations General Assembly determines the name and purpose of the LPE, and any modification regarding naming and purpose would require a corresponding resolution by the United Nations General Assembly. However, the structure, content and methodology of the LPE assessment could be reviewed by the Board of Examiners.

2. Will the LPE be reviewed?

One of the main objectives of the Language Harmonization Project is to facilitate a review of the LPE. Given that any assessment has to be benchmarked against specific standards, the first step towards this review would be to update the definition of the level of linguistic knowledge assessed by the LPE. This was established in 1956 (by ST/AI/113 on Linguistic standards for staff of the United Nations Secretariat) as a “working knowledge” level.

3. What are the UN Language Levels?

The UN Language Framework establishes four levels of language competence for the six official languages:

- UN Level I or Foundational Language Competence
- UN Level II or Intermediate Language Competence
- UN Level III or Advanced Language Competence
- UN Level IV or Expert Language Competence

Each UN language is defined by overall and specific descriptors for both productive and receptive communication activities (oral and written production, comprehension and interaction).

The description of UN Level III (Advanced) is the updated definition of the “working knowledge” level established by ST/AI/113. This level of language proficiency has been renamed as “the working language proficiency in United Nations official languages”. Please see the [UN Working Language Proficiency](#) document¹ for more information.

4. Are all courses offered at all UN Levels in all duty stations?

Duty stations with language programmes are mandated to provide language training in the six United Nations official languages. However, this does not necessarily mean that all courses in the four UN Levels across the six official languages are to be regularly offered

¹This document is a provisional version, as of March 2018; therefore, it might be subject to modification.

in all stations. The language training offered in each duty station can vary according to client demand as well as the resources available and, in any case, this would be the responsibility of the corresponding learning manager.

Staff posted in duty stations with or without restricted access to face-to-face training or to online opportunities, such as instructor led courses offered through INSPIRA, might be offered a license for a self-paced online language course.

5. Can a staff member continue at their level if they change duty stations?

One of the major objectives of the Language Harmonization Project is to facilitate staff mobility across duty stations. The UN Language Framework provides a common reference across language programmes within the United Nations Global Secretariat that will enable smooth transitions from one language programme to another.

6. How do the UN Levels relate to each other?

The four UN Levels of language competence are conceived of as progressive stages in the language learning process. Each level gradually builds on the previous one, reflecting the accumulative dynamic of language learning. Besides their progressive nature within the same language, the four UN Levels are comparable across the six United Nations official languages, so that the content and skills specified will be the same regardless of the language.

7. Will I have to take the reviewed LPE to officially prove that I have Working Language Proficiency (WLP) in a given language?

Yes, since the reviewed LPE will assess the WLP level in all six official languages. At the same time, the LPE will be the exit assessment for UN Level III (Advanced). In other words, the LPE will serve as official certification for both the WLP level and the attainment of the Advanced UN Level (Level III).