Excellencies,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Colleagues

It is a great pleasure for me, as Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and Secretariat-wide Coordinator of Multilingualism, to welcome you to the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and to the Fifth Conference of the Universities that have signed Memorandums of Understanding with the United Nations on the training of language professionals.

More than 100 people have travelled to be with us here today, some over considerable distances, to participate in the exchange of knowledge, ideas and experiences, and to discuss matters of importance to us all. Many more are participating remotely via the UN Webcast service, and they will be invited to use the hashtag of the conference on Twitter [shown on screen] to ask questions to panellists later in the programme.

The training of language professionals is of vital interest to the United Nations. Multilingualism is one of the Organization’s core values, and without the multilingual documentation and interpretation services provided by its high-calibre language staff, the intergovernmental deliberations of its 193 Member States would grind to a halt. The UN Secretariat is one of the largest employers of language professionals in the world. We also have small but vital teams of language staff at four regional commissions. In addition, each year we employ almost 1,000 more language professionals on a temporary or contractual basis during our peak periods.

The workload of the United Nations language services is increasing every year. In 2016 alone, the United Nations translated just under 240 million words and serviced almost 35,000 meetings. And our need to find highly skilled language professionals to keep the wheels of the intergovernmental process turning is as great as ever; as is the role played by the universities that train language professionals in the language combinations we need. Our recruitment examinations are notoriously difficult to pass, which is fully justified because our standards are famously high. But so are the aspirations of the Organization itself. We aim to recruit the very best – because the world deserves nothing but the best. We are counting on you to help us find
and train them. From our side, we are taking steps to make the examinations more accessible and fit for purpose by eliminating outdated technical and substantive requirements, modernizing the process and leveraging remote technologies where applicable.

In that regard, it is a pleasure to celebrate with you this year the 10th anniversary of the founding of the network of universities that have signed memorandums of understanding with us, what we usually call “the MoU universities network” or simply “the MoU network”.

Much has been achieved by the network since 2007. Alumni of MoU universities have steadily continued to pass our open competitive recruitment examinations and fill our posts. Across all languages and professions, MoU universities together fielded 192 of the 365 successful candidates in the examinations held between 2012 and 2016, in other words 52.6 per cent of those who passed.

To complement the training received at university, DGACM introduced formal internships in the language services in 2007. The number of internships offered has soared since from about 20 in 2007, to 228 in 2016, benefiting many MoU university students, who, given their academic profile and skills-set, often beat out the competition for places. Members of the language services have also visited MoU universities and given workshops or masters classes, often on their own time. Many universities report that, in addition to imparting practical knowledge and raising awareness of the skills and standards required, these visits have considerable power to motivate students and teachers alike to value their profession and to aim high and strive for excellence.

Over the years, the Department has diversified the activities arranged under the MoUs. We now offer not only full internships, but shorter practicums and work experiences, as well as visits for teachers. We have also leveraged technology to reach more students in more corners of the world through webinars and remote coaching. Students from six MoU universities played a key role in the launch of the first multilingual United Nations Language Careers portal by translating thousands of words of web content from English into the other five official UN languages. MoU universities now have their own category in the United Nations Annual St Jerome Translation Contest.

The network itself has also expanded over the past ten years. Today it brings together 23 universities from Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, North America and Latin America and the Caribbean. This morning we welcome our most recent member, the King Fahd School of Translation in Morocco, which I had the pleasure of visiting for the signing of its MoU in June last year. Our capacity for formally partnering with more training institutions is of course limited, but we have been exploring ways to enhance our outreach in general by making more use of social media and improving our websites.

We have also made a particular effort to reach out to universities in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean – two regions that are currently underrepresented in the competitive examination process. We are therefore delighted to have with us today
(together with the other universities we have invited as observers) representatives from universities with translation and interpretation programmes in Argentina, Cameroon, Cuba, Jamaica, Peru, Puerto Rico, Senegal and Venezuela, as well as the Coordinator of the Pan-African Masters Consortium in Interpretation and Translation, which is headquartered at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and of which the United Nations is a founding member.

The conferences of the MoU network have also evolved. The first, hosted by the University of Salamanca in 2011, laid the foundations for cooperation. The second and third, hosted by the University of Mons and Shanghai International Studies University, respectively, in 2012 and 2013, enabled us to examine topics of mutual interest, such as mother-tongue training, technological developments and testing. At the fourth, hosted by Herzen State Pedagogical University in St Petersburg in 2015, we focused the discussion on preparing graduates for UN-like work and approved criteria for assessing cooperation under the MoUs.

It was also at the fourth conference, that the network made the excellent decision to hold every other MoU conference at a UN duty station, starting with United Nations Headquarters. We realize from our outreach work that what university trainers (and their students) seek from us is a thorough understanding of the challenges UN language staff face; the skills and knowledge required and the context in which they are applied; and the standards expected. Where better to provide insights into the realities of the day-to-day work of the UN language services than at a UN duty station.

With that in mind, the programme this morning includes a special segment entitled “UN Language professionals in action”. The spotlight will be turned, one by one, on each of the functions performed by UN language staff: namely, editing, translation, précis-writing, interpreting, verbatim reporting and production editing. Representatives of the corresponding services will present and, in some cases, demonstrate the tools they use and the materials they handle. After each presentation, there will be ample opportunity to ask questions and, ideally, to discuss and identify practical ways in which training institutions can prepare their students for such work, individually, together, or in joint activities with the United Nations. The main question is: what the universities – and the United Nations – may do differently to improve success rates at the Language Competitive Examinations? This is in the mutual interest of both the employers and the training institutions. These are the practical outcomes we seek from this Conference.

At least in the morning session, you will be able to pose your questions and make your suggestions in any of the six official languages because we will have full interpretation services, as we do now. I would ask you, in fact, when you take the floor this morning, to speak in your own language if it is one of the six official UN ones. Not only will that give you a taste of what it is like to participate in a multilingual United Nations conference; it will enable our interpreters to showcase their skills as your counterparts listen to the interpretation.

Please take advantage of the opportunity that today’s programme represents to hear from, observe and speak with UN language professionals. Identify the unique aspects of their
work, note the techniques and resources they use, seek them out and talk to them in the breaks. This room must contain some of the most experienced and successful trainers of language professionals in the world. Tap their knowledge, benefit from their expertise and share yours.

Our hope is that you will draw inspiration from what you see and hear over the next two days and use this Conference to enhance, as individual institutions and as a network, the UN-relevant aspects of your training programmes and develop training materials or modules that will help your students acquire the skills, knowledge and competencies that UN language staff need. Then together, through this Conference, we will be fulfilling our purpose as a network and contributing to our common goal: the preparation of the next generation of highly skilled language professionals, ready to take on the challenges of the work at the United Nations.

Whereas today’s programme focuses on the realities of the everyday for UN language staff, tomorrow’s programme looks to the future. In the morning, you will learn about projects and innovations that will impact the training and recruitment of language professionals who wish to work for the Organization. This will be followed in the afternoon by the panel discussion on how to take the network forward. I challenge you to be open-minded and creative, to come up with concrete proposals for the MoU network that can be translated into action in the short term, as well as longer-term projects. What has been missing in the last ten years? What could we do better? What should we do more of, or less off? What win-win opportunities have we not exploited? What practical steps should we take now? These are the questions we must answer if we are to continue to fulfil our purpose over the next ten years as partners in this crucial joint training venture.

After the closing of the Conference per se, you are invited to a panel discussion on multilingualism. I strongly encourage you to attend this event as it will be a rare opportunity to hear the views of Member States on the subject. The Member States of the United Nations, as the main clients of the UN language services are major stakeholders in the training of language professionals in the Organization’s six official languages.

After the discussion on the next 10 years of the MoU network, you are invited to a panel discussion on multilingualism. I strongly encourage you to participate actively in this event as it will be a rare opportunity to hear the views of Member States on the subject. The Member States of the United Nations, as the main clients of the UN language services are major stakeholders in the training of language professionals in the Organization’s six official languages; and you may like to know that through our oversight body, the Committee on Conferences, they take a keen interest and have played a key role in the development and expansion of the MoU network.

After the panel discussion, the celebration of multilingualism at the UN will continue with the award ceremony of 12th Annual St Jerome Translation Contest, where some of you will be accepting prizes in the MoU university category on behalf of your students. The award
ceremony, like the panel discussion, will be another opportunity for our interpreters to showcase their skills.

In short, you have a busy programme ahead of you, and a huge responsibility. Namely, this Fifth MoU Conference is an opportunity for the United Nations and its training partners to assess what has been achieved through the memorandums of understanding, to share best practices, to deepen cooperation and to identify more or better ways to channel high-calibre language professionals towards the United Nations so that their talents can be applied in the pursuit of peace and security, human rights and development for everyone, everywhere. I wish you a productive conference. Thank you for your attention.

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I would now like to pass the floor over to Mr. Movses Abelian, Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management who will chair the first panel which covers the presentation of reports on activities.

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