

The YPP Road

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What was your motivation for taking the G to N (P) exam?

The idea of taking the famous UN competitive examination one day had accompanied my entire service with the UN like a distant myth, given that my country of nationality had consistently been overrepresented within the Secretariat since 2001. When I learned that the alternative variant, the G to P examination, would take me a waiting time of five years of continuous service to be completed at the GS level, I was close to giving up. However, in 2011 Austria unexpectedly appeared on the list of nationalities eligible to take the exam and I immediately seized the opportunity. I registered in the G to N category, that is the lesser known third option where candidates apply based on their nationality (N) while already serving as (G) staff members (and irrespective of the current age limit of 32 years). I was lucky, since G to N candidates are treated the same as external ones, who are said to stand a better chance of being placed once rostered – even though placement may take a long time (often months, sometimes years).

One of the key reasons for me to apply was certainly the prospect of serving in a category that would recognize my qualifications (General Service positions – in theory – do not require a university degree). Another aspect was definitely what is considered closest to the concept of job security that the UN can offer under its present rules: successful candidates, once placed, stand a fair chance of being offered a continuing

contract with the Organization right through to their mandatory retirement date – an incentive not to be neglected in current times...

How long did you prepare for the exam and how?

Due to work commitments, I was only able to devote 10 full days exclusively to studying immediately preceding the written exam. I took leave from the office and went over excessive amounts of documentation during this period in a relentless marathon (supported by surreal amounts of coffee...). Occasionally, I would spend 10 hours a day bent over books, articles, official UN reports and online resources – a scary reminiscence from the law school years... All in all a very intense period, but extremely rewarding (if the notion of the 'bookworm' bears a positive connotation in your personal dictionary...). However, mental preparation for the challenge started much earlier.

The answer is somewhere out there... (look for it!)

In the weeks preceding the exam, I made extensive use of all the resources offered here in Vienna by various VIC offices, such as the Staff Development Unit (e.g. summary writing workshops,

panel discussions with staff who passed the exam) or the UN Information Service (in particular, a workshop on UN careers explaining the details of the exam process, including a question&answer session which was extremely useful). Another indispensable resource was the standard UN publication entitled 'Basic Facts about the United Nations', which provides concise descriptions of the mandates, priority-topics and fields of activity of the various entities of the UN family, and is available from UNIS free of charge – a must-read for the questions on international affairs (see below). Even the much-acclaimed UN.Skillport was exploited for books, presentations and quick guides related to the exam topic – in my case: Administration.

Better late than never

One piece of wisdom I found very encouraging (given that just two weeks before the exam I had not yet opened a single book...): everyone has their own rhythm and approach to studying. The amount of time spent on it is not essential, as long as you feel comfortable and confident about your preparation. In my case, this meant not only jumping at every piece of information I could get about the process, the type of questions and the allocation of points for the various exam parts early on (most of these can be found on the official website of the YPP). It also meant starting to read corny books such as "How to pass exams every time" (this one, by Mike Evans, I can really recommend!).

My personal repository of collected wisdom became a little notebook where I jotted down keywords and summarized facts compiled from various sources about any topic

I determined potentially relevant for the exam (e.g. "climate change", "peace-keeping", or "corruption in the procurement process"). One way of going about such fact-finding exercises was to ask myself what one might be interested to know about a given topic in a nutshell – and then formulate an answer using all available materials.

Practical advice

The written exam is only the first hurdle, but a serious one, and it requires both substantive knowledge and efficient exam techniques to survive 4.5 hours of writing – with a pen! The various pieces of advice in this regard, in particular from past examinees at the various YPP workshops, were invaluable ("practice legible handwriting (over several hours)!", "write the things you know first!", "if you don't know the answer, improvise and structure your lack of knowledge (particularly) well", "avoid drinking too much (water...) during the exam..."). The most spot-on piece of advice was maybe: "Show that you can articulate your thoughts coherently, even if you know little about the subject matter". A well-structured exhibition of facts can sometimes save the day if your technical expertise is limited on a particular subject.

Read, read, read – and learn from others

A very helpful initiative by a colleague was to ask experienced staff in-house who are experts in the areas of the exam topic to name a few common resources they use in their daily work and to identify current "hot topics" in their respective fields of expertise. This call resulted in a wealth of useful references to reading materials and keywords for further independent research. As a result, I learned to appreciate, for instance, the reports of the Joint Inspection Unit, the resource pages of the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts, and the various reports by the Secretary-General to the General Assembly, which are a real treasure trove if you are trying to get a sense of where the Organization is heading and what the current priorities are on the world agenda.

What were your expectations of the test and the exam? Were you afraid? Was the exam harder or easier than you expected?

By the time I got to the exam, I had accumulated so much information about the exam format, the process, and – last but not least – the UN itself that I felt reasonably reassured about what to expect and finally, more than anything else, I was excited and full of positive anticipation. Being nervous is only natural, but adrenaline can actually also help concentration! At the same time, the fact that the exam has, in a way, the power to determine your future is admittedly a little scary...

General vs. specialized

The exam itself is made up of four parts, two of which – together – were eliminatory ('General paper') and two more tested specialized knowledge in the field of Administration ('Specialized paper'). The text for the summary, which tests drafting skills in the English language, was considerably easier than the sample text provided on the YPP website. Summary writing can be practiced, but it helps if the source text is well-structured and straight-forward – which was the case in the 2011 YPP exam. You now also have the liberty to determine the order in which you answer questions, and I decided to do the ten questions on general knowledge of international affairs first, to warm up, rather than starting with the time-consuming summary. These questions were, for the first time in 2011, included in the written rather than the oral part of the exam. This year, they were very factual (e.g. which are the six main organs of the United Nations?) rather than requiring a detailed knowledge of (admittedly complex) current affairs or of the (even more complex) interdependencies between the mandates of various UN organizations. The difficulty here was to be precise about your examples. In any case, most questions could be answered based on a thorough reading of the UN official website and the 'Basic facts' publication.

What is the UN's take on this?

The specialized paper was a real challenge, though. Three essays in three distinct substantive areas, plus nine questions testing additional specialized knowledge in the same three areas: human resources, procurement and budget (together making up the field of Administration). The exam is designed to be suitable for internal candidates as well as external candidates. Therefore, preparation can safely focus on information that is publicly available – digging deep into the intranet will not be necessary, nor necessarily helpful. A solid knowledge of basic concepts tends to be more important than detailed knowledge of concrete processes. In contrast, while UN terminology is not essential (e.g. feel free to say "rotation policy" instead of "mobility", or "raise" instead of "salary increment"), it will not hurt to view common topics through a "UN lens", i.e. from the perspective the General Assembly, the Security Council or the Secretary-General might have on global issues.

How long did the competency-based interview take and what was it like?

The interview – which took place about a month after the results of the written exam were communicated – was purely competency-based and lasted about one hour. The panel was composed of four serving staff from various duty stations with recognized expertise in the subject matter of the written exam. Nevertheless, no questions testing substantive knowledge were asked at this stage of the examination process.

An unexpected challenge to handle on the spot was the fact that questions centered around rather few, select competencies (generally those one would typically expect to appear in a vacancy announcement related to the given job family), but went into great detail in requiring a series of examples on the same competency. This was probably the most challenging aspect of the interview: if you are prepared to talk about one or two examples (e.g. a positive and a negative one) for each of the many competencies listed in the official exam notice, you may run out of

stories to tell by the time you are asked for the third or fourth example on yet another aspect of teamwork or client orientation...

Two pieces of advice I got from predecessors and co-combatants were these:

(1) Make a powerful opening statement when asked the standard question about why you applied for a career with the United Nations and how your experience and qualifications relate to what the Organization might be looking for. The first impression is key.

(2) Whatever you say, be concise and to the point. Don't bore the panel, especially with things that are not essential to understanding your example.

Words of advice for staff who may be toying with the idea of also taking the exam?

Go for it! Enjoy it! (Really) Want it!

1) Do not hesitate. If you are looking for a challenge, if you have a degree and you would like to use it (more), or even if you simply feel like learning more about the work of the UN in a broader context, but have difficulty getting started without a concrete goal or a deadline – go for it! In the worst case, you will have learned many things that may be new to you, or gained a better insight into the bigger picture of your daily job, but the time and effort is certainly not lost. In the best case, the exam opens doors that you may still choose to close (or not walk through just yet) – but you will already feel rewarded and proud of yourself by just having pushed those doors open...

2) If you decide to go for it, don't forget to enjoy the process. Studying can be exhausting, but it opens your mind: it will remind you how much you are capable of; how much (more) there is to know, connect, improve; and you may even gain some reassurance about the (forgotten?) importance, wealth and quality of the work done by the UN around the world, which may also (re-)fuel your ambition to contribute more. GS and Professional jobs alike have a tendency to narrow your focus to the immediate requirements of your job. Any opportunity to take a step back and expand your horizon, even temporarily, should therefore be welcomed and embraced – and enjoyed!

3) Finally, you should (really) want it – all of it. If you don't really want to pass, you will not invest the passion necessary to get ready for it. If you don't really want to travel, live part of your life from a suitcase, or potentially end up in exotic, weird or distant places for years, it may not be a good idea after all. The distinction between GS and P is a much discussed, often lamented reality at present, but it is certainly not a line drawn by reference to intellectual or creative capability, nature or amount of work or even qualification. You can excel, influence, improve or (by means of a negative example) sacrifice your work-life balance in any category. But the lifestyle that (allegedly) goes with either is a conscious choice one should be ready to make...

Last but not least...

It is never too late to try. Some of the finest professionals I have met throughout my (so far short, but rewarding) UN career have taken the path of the exam, whether as external or internal candidates, whether with immediate success or after several "rehearsals", often serving long years in the General Service category before making that fateful step. I know of no one who regretted it.

Good luck!