

A Worldly Job: Young Librarians and the United Nations

By: Kata Koppel

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon when I opened the *New York Times* career section with anticipation. I enjoy looking at job ads for those dream jobs that are often listed. As I scanned the page, an ad for entry-level careers at the United Nations caught my attention. Despite my Bachelor's degree in political science, I knew that it was unlikely there would be a career position listed in my chosen field of librarianships. Much to my amazement the ad touted openings for librarians! I imagined the possibilities of working in the steel and glass United Nations Secretariat building in New York City and set to work finding out more about the jobs offered.

The National Competitive Recruitment Examination is given yearly, generally in February, to citizens of under-represented countries in the United Nations Secretariat. The NCRE is the major gateway to a junior level professional position in the Secretariat in all occupational areas. Professional positions at the United Nations are divided into levels such as P1, P2 and so on based on skills and experience. P2 positions are exclusively filled by those who have passed the examination. In order to qualify for the exam, one must meet several criteria. First you need to be a citizen of a country considered to be under-represented among the Secretariat staff. The United Nations strives for a balance of countries represented in its staff against its membership. This list of countries shifts on a yearly basis, but it has been my experience that the United States has been represented for the last three or four years. Candidates must also have the appropriate first-level degree for their discipline area and be under 32 years old during the year in which the exam takes place.

The exam itself is actually in several parts: the written examination and the oral examination or

interview. The written examination is generally given in February in New York and other locations around the world. Information about the examination including occupational areas and eligible countries for the following Spring is posted in the prior Fall. I applied for the February 2006 examination in October of 2005.

I took the written NCRE in February of 2006 at the United Nations Secretariat building in New York. The exam is given at UN locations around the world on the same day. I'd been to the building before on an official tourist tour, but I could tell that this was something special. It was a cold morning and slightly snowy as I trudged into the building from my cousin's apartment a few blocks away. I had no idea what to expect when I arrived. Armed with my passport as proof of citizenship and enough pencils and pens to rewrite the entire Gettysburg address several times over, I entered the building through the security gates. A line of young people at least one hundred deep curved around the staircase in the main lobby area. Everyone was slightly sleepy but an excitement buzzed through the crowd. Slowly we moved towards the front of the line and the written exam itself. As I got closer to the sign-in table I realized that we were heading into the General Assembly Hall itself. I took my place at Djibouti's seating area on the world political stage with a note of excitement. This was the place that I'd seen on television many times and here I was! What would it be like if I was actually working for the UN? The entire hall was full of test takers. I estimated that there were at least 200 people taking the exam in New York that day, with many more also taking the exam around the world. How many of us were taking the library exam? I did my best to count those who took the library examination book but lost count somewhere around forty.

The written exam consists of two parts: the first is a forty five minute composition, requiring the taker to read and condense some written material and the second is a three hour and forty five minute general examination over occupational specific topics. My hand began to cramp after the shorter exam and I wasn't sure how I was going to make it through the nearly four hour occupational exam without losing a hand to tension. The library exam had both short answer and essay type questions over a variety of topics relating to all aspects of librarianship and diplomacy. Thankfully I had reviewed the suggested study topics and my library school class materials before taking the exam. It felt very much like I would imagine a comprehensive exam for a Master's degree might. As time was called, I knew that at least I had tried my best and would now begin the long wait to find out if I passed the written portion of the NCRE.

Months dragged on as I religiously checked the website for information about the grading status of the exam. The site warned that it would be late summer at the very earliest before those who passed were notified. All candidates were given a numerical code that could be used to check your status anonymously on the web. Finally, in late October I received the news that I had passed the written portion and would now be invited for an interview at Headquarters. Thankfully I was living in New Jersey at the time as the exam took place over a two day period. I also learned quickly that the UN doesn't ask you when a convenient time is for an interview. Rather, they told me that I would be interviewed at 10:00 on a particular Wednesday in November, with a return visit the next day for a tour of the facilities. Information about study topics and tips were included with my letter of invitation. I set to work learning as much as I could about the United Nations, its libraries and programs, as well as world topics before the November interview.

I returned to Headquarters for my interview and was taken through the employee only entrance and whisked up to the Human Resources area on a high floor of the Secretariat building. I met with the Board of Examiners for what is considered the oral examination. Four United Nations employees, mostly from the library, interviewed me for

an hour about my skills and experiences. The UN has moved towards a competency-based type of interview, so the interview was less freeform than those I had experienced in the past. I felt woe-fully underprepared for the questions about the structure of the UN and its composite parts. But, I made it through with laughter and smiles from my interviewers. As I walked out of the interview, one of the librarians made sure to mention that I should walk up a flight of stairs to check out the bathroom with the best view of New York! Up a level I went unescorted, a bit nervous that I was going to be caught and questioned for wandering around the building alone. Across from the Office of the Secretary General was indeed a bathroom with an incomparable view of the city skyline. After taking a few minutes to relax and calm myself, I knew that I still had tomorrow's tour to continue my oral examination.

When I returned to the United Nations the next day, I was greeted with several other candidates from the library occupational group. Five of us in total, four from the United States and one from Norway, would spend the day touring the Dag Hammarskjöld library, meeting with department heads and generally learning more about the functions and procedures of the UN library system. Successful NCRE candidates can be placed at any of duty stations within the United Nations Secretariat, but for librarians New York and Geneva are by far the largest libraries. Coming from an academic library background, I knew a bit about the Depository Library system but I had no idea of the depth of services offered. With an exchange of email addresses, the candidates said goodbye at the end of the day in the hopes of meeting again as employees of the UN libraries.

Around Christmas of 2006, I received the word I had been waiting for! Out of the candidates interviewed, 11 had passed the oral examination and would be placed on the roster for future placement in a librarian position. From the counts I had seen, more than a hundred young people had applied to sit for the written exam. Of those, less than 15 were asked to orally interview in New York. I was excited to be among those who had passed this arduous process. Little did I know that my wait was just starting.

Since the exam is given based on anticipated job openings, it is an inexact science which can lead to long waits on the roster. In fact, a placement on the roster is not a guarantee of employment with the United Nations. Major consideration as to matching the specialization of the successful candidates with the anticipated openings isn't given. According to the official information given to successful candidates, the theoretical limit of time on the roster is approximately one year. After hearing that I had passed the exam I heard nothing from the UN for over a year. I began to get nervous that nothing was happening for me. I sent updated information to the appropriate office as requested and inquired as to my status only to be told that I was "still on the roster". Thankfully I was already working as a librarian and wasn't waiting for a first opportunity.

Finally in February of 2008, as I was preparing to return to Indiana, I received an email inviting me to interview for a position in New York. By this time I had essentially given up all hope of working for the UN in any position, so I was surprised by how excited I was to be asked to interview. I respectfully declined as I literally had my entire life packed into boxes and on a truck to Indiana. Again I waited. In the interim I had discovered a Yahoo! Group which was filled with successful NCRE candidates across all disciplines. In reading their experiences I discovered that my experience was far from unique. Most had been on the roster for over a year before ever being called for an interview. Several people reported having gone through multiple interviews without an offer. The frustration with the roster-based system was apparent. In July of 2008 I received another email for an interview, this time for a reference position in Geneva, Switzerland. I was able to arrange for a videoconference. I am still awaiting the decision for that situation several months later. As I am not fluent in French, I assume my chances are poor, but I am nonetheless excited by the possibilities!

The United Nations is working to become a more technologically savvy and nimble organization. In fact, one of the areas being investigated for improvement is the entire NCRE program and the way candidates are recruited for junior level professional positions. The librarianship exam has not

been given since 2007, so I am hoping that they are going to clear more people from the roster before recruiting again. I am nearing 35 and am less certain that I want to start my career "over" at the UN. I'm not certain how long I will wait for an opportunity to work with the United Nations. I am glad for the experience of seeing behind the scenes of global diplomacy and the librarians that support that work. I've learned much more about myself as a librarian and also about the United Nations as a whole. I strongly encourage young librarians to investigate global librarianship with the United Nations and its related organizations. The NCRE is not the only path to UN employment, but it is one of the largest. Other United Nations organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF recruit young professionals and librarians through their own programs. More information about the NCRE can be found from: <http://www.un.org/Depts/OHRM/examin/ncrepage.htm>

Biography

Kata Koppel is the Information and Instructional Services Librarian at Marian College in Indianapolis. In a past life, she was the Membership Services and Technology Manager at the Indiana Library Federation.

Marian College
Information and Instructional Services Librarian
317-955-6066 (day) 317-429-9177 (evening)
kkoppel@marian.edu
3200 Cold Spring Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46222