
Use and Impact of the Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services

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Abstract:

Parliamentary libraries serve members of parliament in the execution of their legislative, representational and oversight duties. In many cases, such libraries also serve citizens, for example, by disseminating information about legislation being debated or passed. In 2015, the IFLA Section on Library and Research Services for Parliaments (IFLAPARL), in partnership with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), published the Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services. The Guidelines were a response to numerous requests over the years from others who sought advice on how to develop a research service for their parliaments. This paper presents general results from two surveys on the use of the Guidelines since it was published.

Keywords: Parliamentary research service, parliamentary libraries. evidence-based policy making, guidelines, standards.

Introduction

Parliamentary libraries serve members of parliament in the execution of their legislative, representational and oversight duties. In many cases, such libraries also serve citizens, for example, by disseminating information about legislation being debated or passed. What makes this type of library unique is that a parliamentary library usually responds to questions directly with answers (such as information or facts/data) instead of pointing to sources and letting the clients find the answers themselves. In addition, many parliamentary libraries also offer objective, non-partisan policy research, analysis and consultation services, either within the library, or through a separately managed and/or independent research service. Such research services are often viewed as an evolution, and for some, an aspiration, toward a higher level and depth of services that a parliamentary library may offer to its clients. The implementation of an effective parliamentary research service can have an impact on parliaments and citizens, especially where the goal is evidence-based legislation.

In 2015, the IFLA Section on Library and Research Services for Parliaments (IFLAPARL), in partnership with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), published the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services*. This publication was the result of two years of collaborative effort among IFLA members with relatively mature parliamentary research services. The *Guidelines* were a response to numerous requests over the years from others who sought advice on how to develop a research service for their parliaments. It also complemented the *Guidelines for Legislative Libraries*, first published in 1993 and updated in 2009. The launch of the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services* in 2015 was followed by a workshop on the guidelines at the IFLAPARL satellite meeting in South Africa. The *Guidelines* were also translated into Arabic, French, Portuguese, and Spanish by members and partners in the parliamentary community. The *Guidelines* were widely disseminated among the parliamentary library community; members of the IFLAPARL Standing Committee shared the publication at regional parliamentary library meetings in Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe. The *Guidelines* were also used by organizations engaged in parliamentary capacity building, for example, in consulting and training projects aimed at developing the capacity for research services in developing parliaments.

This paper presents general results from two surveys on the use of the *Guidelines* since it was published.

User surveys on the Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services

In July 2016, the IFLA Section on Library and Research Services for Parliaments conducted a survey to obtain feedback on the guidelines that have been authored or published by the Section, including the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services*. A total of 43 individuals representing unique parliamentary libraries/research services or parliament-affiliated institutions responded to the survey. Of those who responded, 74% (32) stated that they have used the *Guidelines*, with 91% rating them as either useful or very useful. One respondent noted that the guidelines were not relevant since the library does not provide a research service. Respondents were given the opportunity to add comments to their responses and the majority did so.

The 2016 survey was general in nature, with the intention to gather input from users on all of the guidelines created by the IFLAPARL section. The survey was conducted not long after the *Guidelines* were published in 2015. Given the official launch of the publication at the 2015 WLIC in Cape Town and wide announcements that follow, it was not surprising that members of the parliamentary library community were quite engaged in providing feedback on that particular publication. It should be noted that the community of parliamentary libraries is small in relation to other libraries such as academic or government libraries: the IFLA Section on Libraries and Research Services has about 90 members.

In February 2018, as research for this paper, another survey was conducted to gather information specifically on the use of the *Guidelines* by parliamentary libraries and/or research services. The 2018 survey was different from the 2016 survey in that it targeted those who have used the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services* and asked for specific examples of how the *Guidelines* were implemented and the results or impact of the implementation. Twenty people responded, of which 95.5% found the *Guidelines* to be useful or very useful, with 1 respondent who said that it was not relevant to their library.

Use of the Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services

Both the 2016 and 2018 surveys provided insight on how the *Guidelines* were used.

- **To plan a new research service, or to justify developing a research service.** Parliamentary libraries that did not have a research service responded that they used the *Guidelines* to draft proposals or talking points to parliamentarians for the development of a research service. One respondent noted that the *Guidelines* were “useful for inspiration, because we are at the start of the process of developing a research service.”
- **To evaluate current services.** Many institutions that already offer research services began doing so before international standards or guidelines were available. With the publication of the IFLA-IPU *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services*, these institutions now have a reference document with which to compare their own structure, services, products and processes. One respondent said that the “Guidelines assisted us with setting standards for our service”, while another stated that “the Guidelines is very useful for our institution in order to assess our services as a whole on a structural basis”.
- **To improve existing research services and/or to add a new component to current services.** This was the most often cited/selected reason for the use of the *Guidelines*. The following specific comments reflected this point.
 - “In our institution, we use the Guidelines to organize our research service, to help our parliamentarians in their job. We have added a news component in our documentation and research service.”
 - “We used the guidelines to develop a draft research policy and a draft strategic plan for the Department of Research Services.”
 - “The document was used as a guide to develop our Research Operational Manual.”
 - “We have slightly adjusted our service charter and try to better promote our services.”
 - “Created fact sheets and briefings as products for teaching [parliamentary] staff.”
 - “We are discussing, based on the guidelines, to improve the use of modern technology to prepare background notes for Parliamentary debates and foreign delegates.”
- **To learn about parliamentary research services or for educational/research use.** With the increasing attention given to evidence-based policymaking around the world,^{1,2} the IFLA-IPU *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services* is viewed as a set of internationally accepted best practices to support parliamentarians who use non-biased information and analysis to develop legislation and set policy. Institutions engaged in capacity building of parliamentary staff and librarians use the *Guidelines* as reference, as stated by a professional in an institution associated with parliamentary capacity building, “I have this as a key reference document for developing a teaching module for training parliaments on how to develop a parliamentary research service.”

¹ US Commission on Evidence-based Policymaking, <https://www.cep.gov/en.html>

² Evidence for policy, see <https://www.inasp.info/theme/evidence-policy>

Two other respondents stated that the *Guidelines* were used to produce research papers.^{3,4}

Other feedback and suggestions

Both the 2016 and 2018 surveys asked users for additional feedback, such as topics that should have been included in the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services* and other guidelines that could be useful to parliamentary library and research services.

When the *Guidelines* were first published, feedback from the 2015 research workshop in Cape Town and the 2016 survey was overwhelmingly positive. However there were comments that the *Guidelines* were written at a high level, and were somewhat inadequate for a specific library looking for step-by-step instructions on how to implement a new research service. As stated in the *Guidelines*, each parliament library and/or research service operates in a unique environment and may be at a unique stage in its development. As such, it would be impossible to draft a document that would apply to all institutions. The *Guidelines* was structured to provide “an overview of considerations” to those institutions that aspire to establish a robust research function.

Partly as a response to the need for more specific best practices and guidelines, the House of Commons Library, in collaboration with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, published its [Parliamentary Research Handbook](#) in 2017. Sometimes referred to as a supplement to the IFLA-IPU *Guidelines*, the handbook provides practical information on how to perform parliamentary research, for example, how to source information, analyse, write effectively, use statistics, tables and charts, and perform quality control on research. The handbook was used in a series of workshops on parliamentary research at the 2017 IFLAPARL satellite meeting in Poland.

Users have also commented that the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research* could expand into related areas such as research ethics, so that parliamentary library and research services can point to published standards, guidelines or best practices when faced with potential conflict of interest while conducting parliamentary research. In response, following the 2016 WLIC, a working group in the IFLAPARL section was formed and has started to compile best practices on research ethics.

Summary

Mr. Martin Chungong, the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and a former member of the Cameroon Parliament, eloquently stated in the forward of the *Guidelines*, “well-resourced parliamentary research services are one of the building blocks of an effective parliament. They are of incalculable value as a source of independent, neutral and non-partisan analysis. ... Their analysis informs a parliament’s legislative and oversight work and provides parliamentarians with the information they need to do their job well.”

From the findings of the 2016 and 2018 surveys on the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research*, it was evident that members of the parliamentary library and research community, especially those seeking to establish research services in their parliaments, found the

³ <http://wroxttonworkshop.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2017-Session-5A-Fitsilis-and-Koutsogiannis.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.inasp.info/en/publications/details/289/>

Guidelines to be useful. The *Guidelines* also serve as a reference when developing and maintaining research services. Since the *Guidelines* were written in response to repeated requests from members of the community, the topics covered were relevant and the content likely to be used.

A lot of work went into the development of the guidelines. The chair of the working group, Sonia L'Heureux, who recently retired as the parliamentary librarian of Canada, provided commendable leadership in coordinating the work of the diverse group and in making sure that the project was on track. There was strong support and engagement from the community of parliamentary librarians who provided input and constructive feedback on the draft versions. In addition, the parliamentary library of Canada provided support for the design and formatting of the document, while the European Parliamentary Research Service translated the guidelines into Portuguese. There was also close collaboration with the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) who provided translations in Spanish and Arabic, printed hard copies for distribution at various meetings, and promoted the publication on its website and directly to high ranking parliamentary officials such as members of the Association of Secretaries General of Parliament.

Finally, while it was relatively easy to obtain feedback on how the *Guidelines for Parliamentary Research* were used by parliamentary libraries and research services, extracting specific information about the impact of the *Guidelines* was more difficult. Most institutions, even those with established research services, have difficulty evaluating the impact of their services in general. The topic of what constitutes success and how to measure and evaluate impact resulting from the use of the *Guidelines* is expected to require continuing discussion among parliamentarian librarians and researchers.