



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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Parliamentary library & research services: Towards an agenda for the next decade



Online conference, 6-8 October 2021
Jointly organized by IPU and IFLAPARL

Concept note

17 August 2021

Why hold a conference?

There are perhaps 300-500 parliamentary library and research services worldwide. Some of these services have hundreds of staff (up to 600+) although many, no doubt, have between one and ten employees – altogether there must be 5,000+ parliamentary staff in the sector worldwide. Providing a parliament with library, information and research services is a professional activity with some unique characteristics. There is only limited scope for learning and sharing of experience at national level so these few thousand staff worldwide are potentially isolated. Opportunities to connect internationally with other parliamentary library and research services are crucial for professional development and the sharing of experience and best practice.

IFLAPARL has provided that opportunity at global level annually for the last four decades through its “pre-conference” associated with the IFLA World Library & Information Congress (WLIC), with a further opportunity in the WLIC itself. These IFLAPARL activities have supported parliaments worldwide through direct professional exchanges at the conferences and the network produced by the meetings – both formal products such as the Guidelines for Parliamentary Research Services (co-published with IPU) and informal connections that allow experience to be shared and guidance to be given. Apart from the cost of attendance, this professional support is free of charge.

Several factors argue for a global online conference in 2021:

1. The opportunity normally offered by IFLAPARL through its ‘pre-conference’ meeting was lost in 2020 (cancellation) and in 2021 (not viable). The last conference was in August 2019 and the earliest possible date for a traditional meeting is August 2022 – a gap of three years (at least). In the meantime, services and individual professionals miss out on the updates and support. A global event has the advantage of diversity and sometimes greater openness to discuss sensitive topics that might not be available at national or regional level.
2. The alternative of an online conference has been demonstrated to be viable – IFLAPARL held a successful online event in December 2020 focused on a single topic, and at least two regional associations of parliamentary library and research services have held successful large-scale online conferences open to a global audience. The IPU has run successful online conferences on a very large scale.
3. The pandemic has posed challenges to service operations and has accelerated strategic changes already under way – notably around the use and impact of technology. There is a critical need to share knowledge and to stay up to date with professional developments worldwide.
4. The multiple challenges of the pandemic and technological change is increasing global divides, between parliaments and services with the capacity to adapt and those which are more constrained. Global sharing of knowledge should help mitigate this.
5. Parliamentary library & research services contribute to effective scrutiny and to the quality of legislation. They contribute to the achievement of SDG16. Investment in these services through a global conference should help maintain and enhance those contributions.

What kind of conference?

Method and target audience

The conference concept has been developed following consultation within the IFLAPARL Standing Committee and a survey open to all subscribers to the IFLAPARL mailing list.

The aim is global participation by the parliamentary library & research community so an online event with IPU support should achieve much of the reach that is desired. Different elements of the conference will appeal to different audiences in the sector. The most numerous IFLAPARL event participants are service managers and most of the content will be delivered and consumed by that group; some of this content may also be of interest to other stakeholders – parliamentary administrators and Members.

Senior/experienced professionals in library, information and research are also numerous in IFLAPARL events and part of the content should be of interest to them. Two further target groups are (a) services which are new or in development and (b) young professionals. These two groups have some overlap in interests – exploration of the fundamentals in service operation and management. Young professionals rarely have the opportunity to participate in IFLAPARL. Some individual services in development attend IFLAPARL, often when an event is in their region or through external support by e.g. donor organisations, but some rarely or ever get the opportunity. The online format is an opportunity to reach these audiences on a larger scale. Finally, organisations concerned with parliamentary strengthening should be interested as they offer support to parliamentary library & research services.

The event should focus on presentation/analysis of professional experience as that is believed to be the main requirement of the participants. ‘Presentation’ does not necessarily mean a slideshow & talk – models such as panel discussions might be more effective in some cases. The interest in presentation of experience reflects the isolated nature of work in parliamentary library & research services: they are a unique professional group within the institution and the institution is often unique in the country, so what they lack is a peer group to share with and learn from. There appears to be less interest in interactive and networking aspects for an online event – which might reflect actual or anticipated experience of such elements in an online context. Substantial time for question/answer and audience participation should nevertheless be included, with the aim of active involvement by as many as possible.

As usual in an IFLAPARL event, presenters should reflect global diversity in terms of geography, gender and types and sizes of service.

Themes

There are three main areas of interest for a global conference in this sector:

1. Current issues
2. Service operations, strategies and developments
3. Support to services and professionals in development

The topics of interest identified for each of those areas are:-

Current issues

The response of parliamentary library & research services to the challenges of the pandemic is a key current issue. IFLAPARL conducted a survey on this in both 2020 and 2021, and the conference will be the opportunity to report the 2021 results. In addition, selected case studies will be presented.

Library & research services have often been the subject of parliamentary strengthening projects but there has been little sharing of knowledge, neither by those who have provided the support nor by those who have received it. IFLAPARL has sometimes been involved in these projects, or individual library and research services have been, but there are many other organisations that have been active over the decades. It is time to discuss 'what works?'

Service operations, strategies and developments

The topics of greatest interest in this area are:

- a. The role of data in parliamentary research and library services
- b. Issues around access, diversity and inclusion with a focus on language
- c. Service strategies for the 2020's – given the rapid evolution of technology and its use by Members, parliaments and citizens; and the long-term changes accelerated by the pandemic; what are the new approaches to service strategy?

Support to services in development and young professionals

IFLAPARL and IPU will jointly publish a new version of the Guidelines for Parliamentary Libraries in 2021 or 2022. The text of this volume will be the basis of workshops aimed at services in development and young professionals, looking at selected fundamental topics in parliamentary library & research services. These workshops will develop awareness of professional issues and approaches in key areas such as current approaches to staffing, user engagement and needs assessment, and challenges such as evidence, impartial advice, and political neutrality.

Background

Parliamentary library & research services

There is no comprehensive survey to provide exact data on the number of services and staff. All of the 193 states in the world recognised by the UN have parliaments, and – it is believed – all or almost all of these parliaments have some form of library and information support service; many also have a research service as part of the library or as a separate entity. Some of the 79 bicameral parliaments have a dedicated library/research services for each chamber, and some parliaments have more than one research service. In addition to the national parliaments that are the primary concern of the IPU, there are parliamentary bodies at the sub-state level in countries with federal, provincial and devolved systems; and there are multiple parliamentary bodies at regional level in Europe and Africa, to mention only two examples. These parliamentary bodies also, in many cases, have library/research support. At global level, the library of the UN headquarters is considered a parliamentary library.

The core activity of these library & research services is the provision of objective, high-quality information to Members of parliament in support of their parliamentary work. Many services also cover other functions – for example, information to citizens, education, national library services, archives etc.

About IFLAPARL

'IFLAPARL' is the **Library & Research Services for Parliaments Section** within the International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA). IFLA was founded in 1927 and is the international

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body representing the interests of library and information services and their users. IFLA has around 1,400 Members in 140 countries, organised in around forty Sections.

IFLAPARL has been active since 1984. It is the only global professional network dealing with library and information services in the parliamentary environment. It has around 90 paid-up members from more than 50 countries worldwide, and an even wider network participates in Section activities. Although IFLA has a library & information professional focus, IFLAPARL also hosts and supports the profession of parliamentary research.

IFLAPARL webpages: <https://www.ifla.org/about-the-library-and-research-services-for-parliaments-section>

About the IPU

The IPU is the global organization of national parliaments. We promote democratic governance, institutions and values, working with parliaments and parliamentarians to articulate and respond to the needs and aspirations of the people. We work for peace, democracy, human rights, gender equality, youth empowerment and sustainable development through political dialogue, cooperation and parliamentary action

IPU webpages: www.ipu.org