

**Major initiatives to improve the quality and value of the research service: Current topics and challenges at the National Diet Library, Japan**

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*Abstracts*

*The National Diet Library (NDL) was created as an organization for legislative support, and its primary objective is to assist members of the National Diet (Parliament) of Japan by performing research and delivering information on national policy issues. A constant effort to improve our research capabilities is essential to achieving this objective. In this regard, the NDL's Research and Legislative Reference Bureau (Research Bureau) works in cooperation with research institutions, scholars, and others experts, both in Japan and abroad, to utilize their expertise in our research.*

*Moreover, the Research Bureau has conducted surveys and interviews of Diet Members regarding our research services five times since 2005. We feel that our services should be client-oriented, and these surveys designed and carried out in an efforts to identify and to satisfy the needs of Diet Members. The most recent survey, conducted in 2014, targeted newly elected Diet Members and whenever possible was conducted as a personal interview rather than as a questionnaire. We successfully interviewed a greater number of Diet Members and their staff than in previous surveys and received frank evaluations as well as suggestions for enhancing our research services. The interviews also served as a good opportunity to improve Diet Members' understanding of our research services, especially with regard to our tailor-made research services.*

*In a nutshell, the 2014 survey indicated a high level of satisfaction with our services overall while at the same time revealing areas in need of improvements. In response to these results, we are now working to improve the quality of our "research on demand" by coordinating interdivisional research requests in a more unified manner and improving publication of anticipatory research. In addition, we routinely review our clients' needs by enclosing a short questionnaire with each research report sent to Diet Members.*

1. Introduction

The National Diet Library, or NDL, was established with the enactment of the National Diet Library Law in 1948 as a legislative support organization for assisting the activities of Members of the

National Diet of Japan. Its main objective is to provide research and information services as well as to deliver appropriate analysis and information about national political issues. As both the parliamentary and the national library of Japan, the NDL also collects books and other library materials, with which it provides a variety of library services for Diet Members as well as for executive and judicial agencies of the national government and for the general public.

The NDL Research and Legislative Reference Bureau specializes in providing legislative research and information services. It offers Diet Members comprehensive background materials, authoritative analyses and evaluations, and factual information on a wide range of legislative agendas. In FY2015, the Research Bureau responded to 41,000 requests for information and research (“research on demand”), and published 337 articles totaling 4,000 pages (anticipatory research). Of the Research Bureau’s 190 staff members, 110 are specialists in policy researchers, while 80 are specialists in information services or provide administrative and support services. The Research Bureau is divided into 14 divisions and 2 offices, four of which provide administrative and information services, and 12 of which provide research services.

This report makes special reference to some of our current initiatives for improving the quality and value of our research services. Of these, the first topic I will cover is recent developments in our Research Cooperation Projects. Secondly and more comprehensively, I will explain about the questionnaires and interview surveys we use to query Diet Members about our research services. This will include a brief history of the surveys, some characteristic results, and an analysis of the most recent results.

## 2. Research Cooperation Projects

The Research Bureau often undertakes research projects on its own initiative with the cooperation of outside experts and scholars. Our Research Cooperation Projects fall into this category.

In July 2012, the NDL published its Mission and Objectives 2012–2016, which replaced the earlier Vision for the NDL’s 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and comprised six objectives to be accomplished during the five years from 2012 to 2016. And, in May 2013, specific strategic goals were added to each of these six objectives.

Research Cooperation Projects are positioned as one of the strategic goals, which calls for the NDL to cooperate with research institutions, researchers, and others, both in Japan and abroad, and to utilize their expertise in our research for the Diet as we acquire a broad range of materials and information from a variety of sources.

These Projects generally involve NDL researchers from one or more divisions of the Research Bureau working in cooperation with outside experts and scholars to produce research on current issues. The scheme encompasses several different formats for research, including interviews with

experts, research meetings, and panel discussions with scholars. Each division implements one or more research projects annually, the results of which are published in multiple formats.

Researching in cooperation with outside specialists and scholars enables us to enhance our research capabilities and to imbue our research with a broader perspective. So I would also like to make mention here of how our approach to research differs from how outside scholars approach it. In particular, the writing of research reports at the Research Bureau is different from that of academic dissertations. Our research reports are required to be non-partisan, accurate, and objective. It is also necessary to include pros and cons and provide a clear indication of data sources in reports. Research Bureau employees cannot set forth their own political opinions in the research papers, since the National Diet Library Law stipulates that we are neither to initiate or nor to recommend specific legislation to Diet Members. Thus the underlying presumptions on which our research is based often differ significantly from those of academic scholars.

Next, I would like to present some examples of recent Research Cooperation Projects which yielded impressive results.

In March 2015, we organized a policy seminar about the finance of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME) and its regulation by the Financial Services Agency. Ordinarily, our researchers make presentations and respond to questions from Diet Members and their staff. At this seminar, however, a finance specialist from a think tank also attended the seminar as a panelist. He provided additional commentary to the presentation of our researcher and also responded jointly to questions from the floor. This resulted in some highly spontaneous debate of the issues and the participants of the seminar seemed as a whole to have come away highly satisfied with the results of this “jam session.”

Next, I would like to present a compilation of special issues from our publications. In the March 2016 issue of *The Reference*, the Research Bureau’s monthly magazine, we published several feature articles about Innovation of Policy Tools in the Public Administration. Several of our researchers as well as a university professor prepared articles for this issue in coordination with the Research Bureau division that specializes in this field of research. The addition of outside research to our efforts inside the Research Bureau enabled us to provide Diet Members with a more useful and multifaceted analysis of a major national policy issue. Moreover, the inclusion of research from an academic scholars in effect provides expert opinions to Diet Members, which implies a direct connection from the general public to the Diet. Thus, in my opinion, this issue of the magazine was a remarkable achievement in this style of compilation.

In addition to the things mentioned above, I would like to talk about our organization of an International Policy Seminar. This event is generally organized once a year with a guest speaker invited from abroad. The latest one was in February 2016 and entitled “The function of parliament in the global era—suggestions for Japanese politics from the EU experiences.” For this seminar, we

invited a professor from France who is a specialist in constitutional and parliamentary law and held two seminars: one for Diet Members and their staff, and the other for general public interested in the European and Japanese politics. Two Japanese professors and a Senior Specialist of the Research Bureau also participated in the seminar, giving presentations and exchanging opinions in a panel discussion, which was followed by a question and answer session with the audience. It was an excellent opportunity to discuss one of the most important issues in national politics, and in particular, to enhance our knowledge of the current state of affairs in Europe and elsewhere, which is indispensable to analysis of middle- and long-term trends in this area. We eagerly organize this kind of event on a regular basis.

### 3. Diet Members' surveys

#### (1) Overview and chronology

Bearing in mind that our research services should be user-oriented, the Research Bureau conducted surveys of Diet Members in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2011 and 2014 in order to improve our services. These surveys were designed and carried out in an effort to identify and to satisfy the needs of Diet Members and provided us with important and useful information about how our users value our services.

Here again I would like to refer to one of the strategic goals of our organization, which is to enhance our role as the brains of the legislature and as an information center for Diet Members in assisting the Diet. Thus, we recognize the importance of providing more and better direct services for Diet Members. Although in many cases our services are provided through research papers and other informational materials, we also make efforts to establish a consultative relationship with Diet Members and their staff through seminars, briefings, and other face-to-face activities. These user surveys are, in fact, another good opportunity for us to interact with and deepen our relationships with Diet Members.

Now, I would like to look at some of the things we have learned from these surveys since 2005.

In 2005, 2006, and 2007, our surveys were all basically in the same style: a combination of interviews to Diet Members and questionnaires for their staff. For each of these three surveys, we first targeted 50 or 100 Members from among the more than 700 members of the Lower and Upper Houses, based on selection criteria such as to which committees they belonged, to which political parties they belonged, the number of times they had been elected, and how frequently they had used our research services. We next made appointments for the interview and delivered a questionnaire to their staff. From these surveys, we see that the results varied from year to year, and that the number of responses was often slightly lower than what we had predicted. The response rates for both

interviews and questionnaires were about 50%, or somewhat low.

In 2011, we introduced a new survey, in which we basically targeted all Diet Members. First, we sent a one-page questionnaire to their offices, and then conducted interviews with the Members or their staff who accepted our visits. Although we received 176 responses to the questionnaire, which was 24.4% of all Members, the number of Members and their staff who accepted our interviews was quite limited. This result clearly indicates both the potential and the limitations of a survey that targets all the Members.

For each survey we analyzed the results at length and highlighted aspects which we felt would lead directly to improvements in our services. For example, based on the responses we obtained from the surveys between 2005 and 2007, we implemented a service providing access to commercial databases via Windows on Research Services, a website service offered exclusively for Diet Members. Diet Members and their staff can now use this service to retrieve articles from newspapers and periodicals, encyclopedia articles, and other information directly from their offices at any time.

## (2) Consequences of the recent survey

After reviewing the results of past surveys and, more generally, our experiences in conducting them, we planned a new survey and questionnaire that was implemented in June and July 2014. This time, however, we narrowed our target to newly elected Diet Members. More specifically, we targeted the 237 Diet Members who were newly elected during the 2012 Lower House elections and the 2013 Upper House elections. We first attempted to make appointments with the Diet Members, in order to have direct interviews either with them or their staff. If neither the Member nor the staff had time for an interview, we asked the staff to answer a questionnaire. When requesting an interview, we explained that we would also take this opportunity to explain our services to the newly elected Members, including explanations of how to best utilize all our services and our tailor-made research services in particular.

We successfully interviewed 69 Diet Members themselves and the staff of other 68 Diet Members. We also received responses to the questionnaires from 46 more, for a total of 183 responses, or 77.2%. This was the highest response rate of any of the previous five surveys.

The responses to this surveys contained much valuable information and frank evaluations of our services. We once again were made to recognize the need for a comprehensive and useful introduction to our research services and also uncovered some future challenges, which I would like to explain in more detail.

First, we found a very high rate of satisfaction with the services we do offer, concerning research on demand as well as anticipatory research. A good 90% of respondents said they were satisfied with our services. The things that were mentioned as being highly appreciated by our users were prompt

responses to requests, the objective and nonpartisan manner of presentation, and highly accuracy research results. With regard to the anticipatory research, the publication of *The Issue Brief*, compact briefing papers on national policy issues, were highly evaluated in general. The results also revealed that a full 84% of respondents, either Diet Members themselves or their staff, have used our services, in spite of the fact that they had been Diet Members for only one or two years. It was also necessary to note, however, that there were some who did not understand how to make research requests to the Research Bureau.

In response to questions about why Diet Members used our services, a major motivation was the need to prepare for questions at committee meetings as well as to obtain information about subjects that were not directly related to the bills before the Diet or to the issues discussed in plenary sessions or committee meetings. An example of this would be important political agendas in the constituencies of the Members.

In addition to the general responses, there were also individual comments that proved to be very useful in our efforts to improve the quality of our services. After analyzing the results of both the interviews and the questionnaires, we identified certain issues which we felt should be addressed, particularly about our research on demand and our anticipatory research.

For example, some respondents mentioned that deliverables from our research on demand service were sometimes inconvenient and not easy to understand, particularly when several divisions prepared different parts of the response separately. Although providing varied perspectives of several different divisions to a single issue has obvious benefits, it is also evident that the responses can appear scattered when the documentation is not properly coordinated in a multidisciplinary approach.

Thus we have recognized the need to reduce such inconvenience to our users by urging each division to coordinate such requests. We are making an effort to standardize which divisions respond to particular requests, and in this way hope to provide responses in a more unified, more appropriate manner, thereby making the results easier to understand and more convenient to use.

Concerning the anticipatory research, we are making every effort to publish reports, articles, and documentation that provide Diet Members with useful information on current issues in national politics. After the survey mentioned above, we especially encourage the research practice in which our responses to research on demand are linked to the preparation for anticipatory research. For example, a briefing performed as part of a research-on-demand request can be expanded and revised for inclusion in reports that are made public. Revising already published reports, especially ones about topical issues for which the situation has progressed significantly is now much encouraged in order to deliver up-to-date information to Diet Members.

#### 4. Closing

We are continuously facing the challenge of enhancing the quality of our services. Given these circumstances, we have also reconfirmed the importance of performing research in cooperation with outside scholars and specialists. The Research Cooperation Projects have already made positive contributions to our research services overall, and we are committed to pursuing even more significant projects that will enhance our research capabilities.

User surveys targeting Diet Members are a significant means for us to bear in mind that responding to the needs of our users—which is to say, Diet Members—is our primary goal. We have routinely enclosed short questionnaires each time we deliver research reports to Diet Members in order to gauge their needs for research services as well as to evaluate whether or not our responses are fulfilling their requests and to enhance the quality of our tailor-made research services.

We are now designing a new survey to be used in the near future in hopes of enhancing and expanding our services even more.