

IFLAPARL Ethics Checklists

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This version of the document is as adopted by IFLAPARL in August 2019 with minor corrections

Version 2b / February 2020.

IFLAPARL Ethics Checklists

Introduction

1. Background

In 2015 IFLAPARL published the ‘Guidelines for parliamentary research services’, complementing the long-standing ‘Guidelines for legislative libraries’. At the 2016 IFLAPARL conference it was noted that neither set of guidelines offered explicit and systematic guidance on the ethical questions that arise in daily work in the sector. During the 2017 IFLAPARL conference the issue was presented and a survey revealed practical examples of ethical issues which participants had either confronted or to which they felt vulnerable. The survey responses were converted into cases for workshop discussion. There was a common sense from the workshop that this was an issue that needed addressing and it was best addressed collectively. Very few services, if any, had all the tools to deal with all the potential issues.

The IFLAPARL Standing Committee set up a working group, the initial idea being to provide guidelines. This approach was quickly modified as it was recognised that services operate in diverse contexts, with diverse purposes and intentions. The approach to considering ethics must reflect this diversity - IFLAPARL cannot set down a single definition of ethical standards that can be applied by all services in all contexts. The working group instead decided to develop a checklist of issues on which services could self-assess and decide for themselves as to whether action was feasible and necessary.

The aim has been to avoid, where possible, the duplication of ethical guidance already available for the profession of librarianship and information science, standard guidance on (academic) research ethics and standard public sector ethics frameworks. There is also generic guidance available for parliaments, such as the recently published Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s ‘Recommended benchmarks for democratic legislatures’. The choice of topics in the present checklist is not comprehensive but selective, **focusing on issues which have been identified by IFLAPARL members** as having practical relevance to our services. As library services have generic professional ethical guidance there is more attention to issues for parliamentary research services. In part, the checklists draw inspiration from, and complement, the ‘IPU/IFLA Guidelines for parliamentary research services’ (2015).

Some questions are derived from the published guidelines and similar sources, and therefore reflect a professional view of what is right and wrong in this context. Other questions do not necessarily have a ‘right’ answer – some raise questions which services have previously found (diverse) answers to, but neither question nor solution may be relevant everywhere. In any case, the checklists are intended to stimulate thought and, we hope, some action, not lay down a law. There is no requirement to use the checklist, to employ external validators or to publicise that it has been used and with what results. It is a tool available for services to use, that is all.

The development of this document has involved contributions in coffee shop discussions, voluntary and open informal workshops at conferences, sharing of policy documents from individual services, formal presentations and discussions, conference workshops and online collaboration through IFLAPARL – mainly but not exclusively members of the Standing Committee. The various project documents have

been widely circulated and there have been collective and informal individual requests for comment and contributions outside the working group. The final draft document was circulated to all IFLAPARL contacts then presented and discussed at the IFLAPARL conference in Athens in August 2019, and has been adopted by IFLAPARL. This version contains minor revisions and it is intended the document will be updated/revised with experience. Amongst the many contributors so far were (in no particular order): Paola Mandillo, Steve Wise, Diane Heriot, Mary Mazanec, Ellie Valentine, Sonia Bebbington, Fotis Fitsilis, Clara Bessa, Hannah Fisher, Adolfo Furtado, Ida Kelemen, Edward Wood, Chama Mfula, Velia Manyonga and Joanna Wozniczko. All of them, and the many contributors in workshops, are thanked. None of them is responsible for any errors, omissions or other failings in this document.

Iain Watt,

Edinburgh, December, 2019.

2. A minimum threshold

Although we have avoided laying down standards, *for the checklists to be useful* there is a minimum threshold to which services *should aspire*. (Services may not always in all circumstances actually reach the threshold, but the aim, the aspiration, should exist). This is a purely practical point to avoid waste of resources on assessments without a real point. The threshold applies to the core work of a parliamentary research service - **the provision of evidence for parliamentary work on policy and legislation**.

(‘Evidence’ corresponds to what the ‘Guidelines for parliamentary research services’ describes as the ultimate reason for creating a research service: the provision of ‘non-partisan and balanced analysis that is adapted to the needs of parliamentarians’. The Guidelines refer to ‘developing, assessing and voting legislation’ as a ‘key role’ for Members. They note that Members also hold ‘governments to account’ and ‘scrutinize the activities of governments’. In relation to these core activities of Members, on legislation and policy issues, the core work of parliamentary research and library services is to provide ‘authoritative and concise material’ i.e. evidence).

It quickly became clear that great flexibility was needed to accommodate the many different circumstances in the sector. Following the workshops on the draft checklists at the IFLAPARL conference in 2018, however, it also became clear that a service must be committed to a minimum professional approach in its core activity for any of the checklists to have meaning or practical use. If a service is not committed to delivering impartial and authoritative evidence for Members, then it really would be a waste of their resources to use the checklists.

Following discussion of this conclusion in the Standing Committee and by the working group, the concept of a threshold was accepted. The recommended first step in developing an approach to ethics is, therefore, to address the points below and seek a common understanding within the parliament as an institution, with its individual Members, the responsible administration and the personnel of the research or library service.

In the delivery of **evidence for work on policy and legislation**, a parliamentary research or library service should:

1. Observe professional independence and impartiality in defining research methods, selection of sources, undertaking analysis and providing expert assessments and opinions. These are professional tasks requiring professional staff working to international professional standards. While Members and the administration may define the requirements and can hold the service accountable for quality, to be of value as **evidence**, the professional process of delivery of information/research should be free from intervention, influence, pressure or decision from outwith the professional service.
2. Provide content based on science and international standards of scholarship. Content based on non-expert opinion/belief, if provided, should be clearly distinct and indicated as such.
3. Impartially select sources based on quality and the fair representation of recognised scientific views, coherent with the requirement of the request.
4. If analysis/summarising of source content is provided, the sources should be faithfully reflected.
5. Provide analysis and summaries that are balanced and non-partisan, except if the request is for a particular view of an issue. (If such requests for scientific support of a ‘partisan view’ are accepted at all; policies vary).
6. If the request is for a particular (partisan) view of an issue, this should at all times be explicit and transparent especially in public communication of the results, and the response should maintain standards on the quality of content, to ensure the reputation of the research or library service.

These desired characteristics apply specifically to the **provision of evidence for work on policy and legislation** and may not apply to other forms of service. Some parliamentary research and library services have activities that go beyond this core function, such as public relations, and we do not suggest that the minimum standard must apply to those – only to the core activity.

It is understood that the characteristics may be a constant aspiration rather than a permanent and universal fact. Even the aspiration is important and valuable.

3. The checklists

Beyond the minimum standard described above, IFLAPARL recognises the diverse situations of parliamentary services and does not seek to prescribe a framework for all those situations. The approach is rather to provide questions that a service may use to assess itself, to reflect on together with parliamentary administrations, and perhaps to seek benchmarks elsewhere.

There are currently seven distinct checklists:

1. Mandate
2. Professional autonomy
3. Access
4. Resources
5. Production
6. Staff
7. Members

4. IFLAPARL

'IFLAPARL' is the Library and Research Services for Parliaments Section of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations.

The Section is concerned with parliamentary library and research services - for the national legislatures in the case of unitary states and both national and second-tier legislatures in the case of federal countries. All forms of information and research service for legislators - and their support staff - are of interest to the IFLA Section on Library and Research Services for Parliaments.

Membership of IFLAPARL is available through membership of IFLA, which may be by institutional or individual subscription. By joining IFLAPARL services and individual professionals will become part of a global community sharing best practice, ideas and innovations. The Section meets annually at the IFLA Conference (WLIC) and normally also has its own conference immediately preceding the WLIC.

IFLAPARL guidance, available in multilingual versions:

[Guidelines for Legislative Libraries](#)

by Keith Cuninghame (Ed.)

[Guidelines for parliamentary research services](#)

IFLAPARL website:

<https://www.ifla.org/services-for-parliaments>

Ethics Checklist 1 - Mandate

The 'mandate' for the service is its constitutional document(s), setting out what it is intended to do (and not do) and the principles by which it should operate.

'Mandate' Issues

- An explicit, clear, comprehensive and up-to-date mandate reduces the number of ethical choices that parliamentary research & library services need to make.
- The mandate itself may not be completely 'ethical' according to some viewpoints. It is, however, for the institution to define what it wants from an in-house service and to take responsibility for choices made in the mandate. Provided the mandate is explicit, professionals can make the ethical choice whether to accept it - or find work elsewhere.
- The professional role in the service is to apply the explicit mandate fairly, ethically.
- If there is not a clear, comprehensive and up-to-date mandate, or if issues are not (well) answered in the mandate - then the service itself must devise practical and ethical answers. This is a challenge and imposes additional professional responsibility, which in turn requires support in the form of training and a structure which allows for independent professional decision-making.
- Some professionals might prefer a vaguer mandate which permits them to devise an appropriate ethical policy for their service.

'Mandate' checklist		Notes
1.1	Is there a clear, comprehensive and up-to-date mandate for the research & library service, set by parliament or a parliamentary body?	
1.2	Are there specific ethical standards set for the research & library service, in the mandate and/or separately? Are the ethical standards set only internally, by the service itself, or are they set by parliament or a parliamentary body?	
1.3	Are there general ethical standards for the institution and/or the public service in general, complementing the ethical code of the research & library service?	
1.4	Taken together, is the existing framework of ethical standards, at service and institutional levels, comprehensive in relation to the risks and challenges faced by the service?	

Ethics Checklist 2 - Autonomy

A key value in IFLAPARL is that research/information for parliament is 'independent', but parliamentary research & information services are autonomous, not fully independent. The greater the professional autonomy, the more that ethical choices can and should be made.

'Professional autonomy' issues

- The ideal is delivery of unbiased information without partisan favour in service delivery. This is best achieved by independent professional analysis and information research. The starting point is therefore professional research, library & information staff, at all levels - as the aspiration at least.
- 'Independence', however, is put in question by the location of the service (in most cases) within a wider institutional administration. The service is "accountable" to the administration, and reliant on it for resources and various forms of "support" (including e.g. some permissions to act and to use its resources).
- Personnel, at least at leadership level, are most likely appointed by, and dismissible by, the wider administration if not by Members.
- In some cases, personnel may be allocated from a general administrative pool and move in and out of services including research & library, meaning that their career depends on the wider administration and not the research service alone. This may in some regards compromise independence.
- With less autonomy, ethics move beyond the control of the service and depend on the general ethical standards of the institution. Even in a best-case scenario, the specific ethical issues around research may not be recognised and are more likely to be accidentally compromised.
- Direct reporting to Parliament, the Speaker and/or a governing Committee exists in some cases and may enhance the professional autonomy of the service - increasing the responsibility for ethical standards

'Professional autonomy' checklist		Notes
2.1	Are there are minimum requirements for relevant professional qualifications for roles in the service?	
2.2	Are decisions on research/library/information staff careers and service budgets dependent on the political acceptability of scientific views and products rather than on the professional quality of output or other objective criteria?	

'Professional autonomy' checklist		Notes
2.3	Is the need for autonomy of professional processes in research/library/information service understood by the institution and respected in practice?	
2.4	Is the head and/or staff of the research/library/information service overruled on matters of professional judgement/good practice by the administration? Can duly requested/justified research be blocked by administrative decision outside the service, formally or informally? Would critical research into the parliamentary administration, to meet Member needs, be freely permitted to proceed?	
2.5	Does the head of service report directly to Parliament, the Speaker or a Committee of Members dedicated to oversight of the service, on matters of professional practice and output?	
2.6	Is the autonomy of professional processes in research / library / information service defined in its mandate or other policy document?	

Ethics Checklist 3 - Access

'Access' concerns the ability of clients to obtain service. This means in the literal sense e.g. by physical visit or online. But it refers also to what kind of service they can obtain, whether it meets their needs and is provided in a form that they can easily use, whether they feel welcome.

'Access' issues

- While the 'IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers' implies an ideal of equality between clients and their requests/needs, the parliamentary research/library/information service may have a hierarchy of clients and requests/needs.
- Access rules may be determined (entirely or in part) by the mandate. In any case, there are usually explicit policies, but also often some reliance on tradition, judgement and discretion. Explicit and transparent policies generally make it easier to adopt a consistent ethical approach.
- The explicit policies may not themselves be 'fair' or treat all clients equally - that is normal in a private service for an organisation - but they should at least be applied evenly and fairly.

'Access' checklist		Notes
3.1	Is who gets service, and does not get service, defined and transparent?	
3.2	Is it the case that either :- a) all valid requesters and all requests are to be treated equally or b) there is a clear and transparent order of priorities? [Other options exist but the above two options derive from ethical guidelines]	
3.3	If the answer at 3.2 is (b), how are those priorities determined? Are they approved by the parliamentary body responsible for the service, or are they set internally? Are priorities based on types of client (e.g. individual Member v. parliamentary body) and/or reason for request (e.g. to support legislative work v. constituency business)?	

'Access' checklist		Notes
	<p>Are the policies clear and transparent?</p> <p>Do the policies provide guidance for fair and practical resolution of multiple requests at a time of service overload?</p>	
3.4	Do the policies set a clear scope to the topics and depth of research to be expected from the service?	
3.5	<p>Do the policies provide guidance on inadmissible requests - what they are, and how they should be handled?</p> <p>Are the following requests prohibited?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) for the personal or commercial benefit of the requester, or an associate b) for party-political purposes, outside of parliament c) research on another Member's background and activities <p>Are other types of request prohibited, and is it clear why and is the prohibition consistent with the mission?</p>	
3.6	Do all individual Members (and/or their staff) and political parties have guaranteed access to at least some minimum service?	
3.7	<p>Have all staff making decisions on access been trained in the policies to apply? Do service staff have a complete and shared understanding of the policies on access and priorities?</p> <p>In as far as access decisions are based on discretion, have staff been trained in making fair and ethical judgements?</p>	
3.8	Does the design of the service, its products and facilities - including digital services - take into account the diversity and particular needs of its (potential) clients, to ensure accessibility? (E.g. languages, disability, education, technology available).	

'Access' checklist	Notes
<p>Is there a positive effort to make the service accessible and welcoming to all Members?</p> <p>Have staff received training in welcoming and making access possible for all kinds of client?</p>	

Ethics Checklist 4 - Resources

Choices must always be made - no one has infinite resources to respond to clients. If there is no explicit guidance on priorities then there is a risk of unethical consequences.

'Resources' issues

- One typical example of a priority in research might be: to give higher priority to support of collective legislative work rather than to individual Member requests relating to their constituency business.
- Research (including library research) is often worked on individually by the staff member. They may, in practice, exercise considerable discretion on how far to take the research. Some decisions on priorities and effort are effectively made at individual staff level. How to ensure that ethical standards are applied consistently?

'Resources' checklist		Notes
4.1	Are there explicit policies for prioritising effort? If yes, are staff aware of the policies and trained in applying them?	
4.2	Are there explicit priorities for how resources (e.g. staff time, money) are allocated to different kinds of service/product? Are there minimum and maximum limits set for effort in response to requests? (For priorities between clients - see Access checklist)	
4.3	Is proactive service an option? (For example, to produce research reports without a specific request, to meet a perceived need). If yes, then is it clear & transparent: a) What priority it has compared with individual requests? b) How proactive topics are selected?	
4.4	Is any research outsourced? If yes, is the need for economy (price criterion) balanced by the need for quality in selecting a contractor? Are there safeguards to avoid deliberate low bids from contractors receiving external subsidy (e.g. lobby or political interests)?	

Ethics Checklist 5 - Production

Is research produced in an ethical way?

'Production' issues

- We can draw on approaches to academic research ethics such as the 'The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity'. The 2017 version is available here in several languages: <https://www.allea.org/publications/joint-publications/european-code-conduct-research-integrity/>
- One ethical question is whether production is organised so as to treat formally equivalent clients/requests equitably; or whether there are informal schemes to allocate priority between clients/requests in the production process
- Can the obligation to achieve 'value for money' with public money be seen as an ethical point?

'Production' checklist		Notes
5.1	<p>Are there guidelines supporting ethical standards in production by research and library services? Are they set by the parliamentary body responsible for the service or are they set internally by the service itself?</p> <p>Are all relevant staff and managers trained in the interpretation and implementation of these standards?</p> <p>How is achievement of the standards checked? How often?</p> <p>Is there a regular review of the standards and their application?</p>	
5.2	<p>Does production of research conform to all relevant aspects of the '<i>European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity</i>' or a similar code?</p> <p>In particular, do guidelines and practice in research respect the fundamental principles of research integrity - reliability, honesty, respect and accountability?</p> <p>How does the service know this is applied in practice?</p>	
5.3	<p>Is partisanship explicitly recognised as a risk in producing research products, and are there practical safeguards to manage the risk?</p>	

'Production' checklist		Notes
	Are relevant staff and managers trained in management of this risk?	
5.4	Do safeguards exist to prevent research findings being unduly influenced by stakeholder inputs, particularly those of questionable scientific quality? What kind of safeguards? Do they rely on individual staff and managers maintaining personal ethical and professional standards? Or are they formalised and organisation-wide?	
5.5	When external expertise is utilised, are methods used to ensure open competition and/or fair selection of the most suitable expert? Are there procurement standards and are they followed? Are effective methods used to ensure the integrity of external research? Is the risk of conflict of interest effectively managed? Are the same standards of quality, objectivity and impartiality applied to externally-sourced research as are applied to internal products?	
5.6	Are parliamentary requesters guaranteed confidentiality of:- a) identity? b) question? c) answer? Are confidentiality standards ensured by explicit rules, procedures and training? Is access to confidential data limited within the service and only accessible to personnel subject to the ethical standards of the service? Can the service be obliged to disclose confidential client data to the administration or a third party?	
5.7	Is feedback on the service and its products, from Members and others, both facilitated and welcomed?	

'Production' checklist		Notes
	When justified, does it lead to change? (Negative criticism or positive suggestions)	
5.8	Do the same standards of production quality apply to all clients/requests of the same formal priority?	
5.9	Do experts have the final say on specialist content, assuming that it has been produced according to the request made and the standards of the service? Are the circumstances in which a general manager can over-rule specialists, regarding content issues, defined?	
5.10	Does the production capacity match the service offer, promised quality standards and client expectation? If research staff are part-time or contracted ad hoc, do they have sufficient time and opportunity to deliver to required standards?	
5.11	Is there a requirement on management and staff to deliver the service for an optimal balance of efficiency, economy and effectiveness? Is performance in those terms assessed?	

Ethics Checklist 6 - Staff

Many staff issues are generic in a public administration. They will be defined and managed by the human resource management function. Only the most relevant are mentioned in this checklist.

'Staff' issues

- There are specific points of interest for research and library services, with some examples below: -
- (Perceived) conflicts of interest jeopardising the perceived independence of the service.
- Information and knowledge gained as a member of staff, and how that is shared or not shared.
- Relations with Members and with lobbyists.
- 'Conflict of interest' here can be interpreted to include active membership or perceived identification with a political party - but in some parliamentary administrations such affiliations may be considered normal.
- In some parliaments, there may be issues of Members with perceived "terrorist" or "ex-terrorist" connections, and staff with particular sensitivities regarding that. In others, there may be similar issues around e.g. past or present ethnic conflict

'Staff' checklist		Notes
6.1	Are there rules on non-disclosure and non-exploitation of:- a) Internal service information? b) Knowledge gained during duties that would be unavailable to an ordinary member of the public?	
6.2	Is potential conflict of interest, in relation to research production or information provision, clearly defined and forbidden? Is there clear guidance on identification of interests, transparency, management of interests and the process to follow in case of conflict of interest?	
6.3	Are there rules and/or guidance on contacts with lobbyists and other interested parties, and on the acceptance of hospitality or gifts, relevant to the production of research or delivery of information by the service?	
6.4	Are there rules regarding private financial interests relevant to the production of research or delivery of information by the service?	

'Staff' checklist		Notes
6.5	Do staff have the right to refuse to serve a particular Member or party on grounds of conscience or belief?	
6.6	Are close personal relationships with Members, or their staff, seen as inconsistent with work in the research/library/information service?	
6.7	In cases where research staff have other duties in other services of the institution, or employment externally, are there effective measures to manage any potential conflict of interest and to ensure adequate priority to research service needs?	

Ethics Checklist 7 - Members

There is an unspoken reality of everyday power and influence of Members (individually as well as collectively) in a parliamentary administration. This is one feature which makes parliamentary administrations different to mainstream public administration.

'Members' issues

- The influence of Members, consciously or unconsciously, exerts pressure on the operation of formal processes and policies as well as on people.
- Ideally, Members should not have the means of instructing, pressuring or influencing the research or library service in order that it produces partisan or unscientific, research. (E.g. influence on budget decisions; operational decisions; service or individual reputation +/-; career).

'Members' checklist		Notes
7.1	Are there safeguards to protect research/library staff from sexual or other harassment by a Member?	
7.2	Are there guidelines for Members on ethical issues concerning their use of the research/library/information service? Does this include misrepresentation of research/information?	
7.3	Are there effective methods to handle requests for research that is skewed to support particular views, while preserving the integrity, impartiality and scientific authority of the service?	
7.4	Do Members have the power to suppress or amend legitimate research before or after publication?	
7.5	Can research known to be unwelcome to powerful Members/parties, or in potential contradiction with existing parliamentary positions, be produced and published by the service, if there is good reason within its mission to do so? Are there safeguards that would protect service management and personnel from career or other consequences in such a case, before or after publication?	

'Members' checklist		Notes
7.6	Do Members have any right to refuse service from individual staff of e.g. a particular religion, gender or ethnic origin?	