An International Executive Program for Parliamentary Staff

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AN INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE PROGRAMME FOR PARLIAMENTARY STAFF

Ongoing professional development courses are fully recognized in other occupations, even to the point of being a requirement for continued work in some jobs. Professional development courses for parliamentary staff are, however, less common. A new parliamentary staff course combining face-to-face training with continuing virtual support has begun at a Canadian university, writes the course’s leader.

Dr Rick Stapenhurst and Ms Vienna Pozer

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Recognizing that parliamentary staff are the “corporate memory” and procedural experts of Parliament, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and the World Bank Institute (WBI) have, both individually and collectively, organized a variety of training courses for parliamentary staff across the Commonwealth. Topics have included Committees, Parliament and the Budget, and Poverty Reduction and Financial Oversight, among others. Four years ago The Parliamentarian reported the substantial training programme expansion gained through the use of web-based learning courses (R. Stapenhurst and B. Prater, The Parliamentarian, 2008, issue four, p.337). Feedback from participants in both the traditional (face-to-face) and web-based courses has been positive, with staff welcoming tailor-made courses designed to assist them to carry out their work within Parliament. There has been a growing demand from staff, however, for a global, university-certified, executive-level training programme... a programme that would combine the personal aspects of face-to-face training with the flexibility of web-based courses and which would be certified by a top class Commonwealth university. In this article, we describe the process which CPA and WBI have followed to launch such a programme.

1. Ensuring success through consultations

To ensure the success of such a programme, CPA and WBI recognized the importance of obtaining substantial input from the potential users of the programme, the parliamentary staff, at the design and conceptualization stages. Guidance from the Clerks and Secretaries General was essential to ensure that the programme curriculum and its delivery would be in line with the contemporary needs of the parliamentary staff. As a result, a three-stage process has taken place, involving regular briefings to Commonwealth Clerks and Secretaries General, a survey mailed out to Clerks and Secretaries General across the Commonwealth and the Francophonie and a WBI-CPA study group which gathered in depth views from parliamentary staff of both Communities.
CPA and WBI have briefed Commonwealth Clerks and Secretaries General at the annual Society of Clerks at the Table meetings, held concurrently with CPA's annual conferences and of the Association of Secretaries General of Francophone Parliaments (ASGPF). Through such consultations, both organizations were able to obtain useful feedback in terms of the need for, and parameters of, such a programme.

In addition, a questionnaire, designed to obtain specific feedback on existing programmes within each parliamentary jurisdiction, on the utilization and experience of the WBI/CPA web-based E*Learning courses and on the proposed university-certified programme itself, was sent to more than 150 Clerks/Secretaries General from the Commonwealth and la Francophonie. A total of 36 per cent (for the Commonwealth) and 41 per cent (for la Francophonie) Clerks and Secretaries General responded, providing useful feedback and providing a general endorsement to proceed with the development of the proposed programme.

Thirdly, in order to tailor the programme specifically to the needs of high-potential, mid-level parliamentary staff, CPA and WBI convened a Study Group in May 2009 which was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Those in attendance included: Bangladesh (Mr Ashfaque Hamid, Secretary of the Parliament and Mr Pranab Chakraborty, additional secretary); Burkina Faso (Mr Alphonse Nombri, Secretary General of the National Assembly); Cambodia (Mr Oum Sarith, Secretary General of the Senate and Mr Sok Kun Chhim); India (Mr PPK, Ramacharyulu, Director, Rajya Sabha Secretariat); New South Wales (Mr Russell Grove, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly); and South Africa (Mrs Sesh Paruk, Human Resources Executive). Also present at the meetings were representatives from the WBI (Dr Rick Stapenhurst and M r Niall Johnston) and from the United Nations Development programme (Mr Warren Cahill). Mr Paul Belisle, former clerk of the Canadian Senate acted as facilitator and rapporteur. The participants reviewed and endorsed the results of the questionnaire and made significant recommendations to WBI and the CPA.

Nature of the programme
Participants in the study group noted that, for the executive training programme for parliamentary staff to succeed, it would need to be adaptable, accessible and unique.

Adaptable: study group participants believed that, for the programme to succeed, it would have to have a strong base and should build on CPA and WBI successes and strengths. It was determined that the programme should be structured in such a way to allow for changes and growth in areas such as curriculum, delivery modalities, and admission requirements so as to meet the evolving needs of Parliaments. This would require rigorous evaluations by WBI’s Evaluation Group and by the participants’ own evaluations on the quality and relevancy of courses and their effectiveness. It was thus recommended:

- that the programme be structured to allow future changes and growth to permit other languages, and other groups such as staff of the executive and judicial branches of the government to participate

Accessible: study group participants proposed that such a programme should be built on the existing WBI/CPA E*Learning modules, which were proving to be highly successful, with a substantial uptake, particularly by African parliamentary staff. This method of delivering training courses has proven to be effective and its success would serve as a model for the programme. E*Learning, it was noted, allows for increased access, cost efficiency, convenience and flexibility to participants as it enables them to develop essential information and communication skills.

Study group participants suggested that the programme should only be available to mid-level parliamentary staff who have demonstrated a potential to reach the highest levels of parliamentary management. Applicants to the programme, it was believed, should possess a bachelor’s degree or equivalent work experience. Results of the questionnaire indicate that the vast majority (82 per cent) Clerks and Secretaries General favored the programme targeting Chamber or Committee procedural staff while 50 per cent thought the programme should be offered to administrative staff involved in the corporate governance of Parliament. Some 26 per cent felt that research staff mostly from Parliamentary libraries and political caucuses would also benefit from such a programme. In short, it was generally felt that all mid-level staff, no matter their areas of their responsibility within Parliament, would benefit from the programme. However in order to ensure professional academic standards, it is recommended,

- that the minimum requirements for admission to the programme be a bachelor’s degree or equivalent work experience and that a competitive and highly selective administrative process be adhered to.

It was proposed that the programme would be offered initially in English and subsequently in French. Moreover, it was thought that the programme would be developed for parliamentary staff only and not be offered to Members, as such a joint programme (to both staff and Parliamentarians) would result in a curriculum that would be too loaded, and most probably, with conflicting goals. It was therefore recommended:
unique: Study Group participants argued that the programme should offer a unique training and capacity building plan for mid-level parliamentary staff. It should combine a theoretical and a practical approach, use a blended learning methodology of face-to-face training, a web-based learning and possibly videoconferencing for its delivery. In order to safeguard its uniqueness, the programme should be structured in a way so as not to compete with existing training efforts. Study group participants recommended:

- that a review of university curricula be undertaken to ensure that the programme not compete with existing efforts of universities under core parliamentary functions needed to be expanded, to include:
  - three new courses: i) in parliamentary procedures and practices (including privileges and immunities of Members, rules of debate and parliamentary documents); ii) parliamentary management (including leadership training); and (ii) possible courses of a more specific nature such as information technology, research and legislative drafting.

Other courses were also recommended, including federal/provincial/local relations, Hansard reporting, information management, parliamentary diplomacy and international affairs. For this reason, the study group recommended that a data bank of courses be created to orient staff in disciplines that would not be offered by the programme. As an example, a course in (say) Hansard reporting, which would be too technical to be offered within the constraints of the proposed programme, could be identified. It was thus recommended that:

- that WBI create a data bank of courses and act as the conduit to institutions for participants who may wish to specialize in specific areas not offered by the programme.

It was further believed that participants of the programme should also have the opportunity to customize part of their programme by choosing elective courses from the list of modules listed in the development series that would meet their individual interests and career goals. Thus, the study group recommended:

- that the compulsory courses, be supplemented with pre-approved elective courses selected from the development series.

Study group participants and survey respondents stressed that the pedagogical approach also had to include a practical facet. This would permit staff to address specific regional/local concerns of their legislative institution and/or to develop skills and abilities that they need in their current or future jobs within Parliament.

It was believed that the programme should entail opportunities or integrative mechanisms to complement the theoretical and practical courses. Case studies of personal or local interest, a study trip to another Parliament or an in-house research assignment were possibilities that it was felt would enrich the programme.

Such opportunities would be pre-approved by the director of the programme in consultation with the participant’s supervisor. It is recommended:

- that integrative mechanisms of practical nature be built into the programme to complement the theoretical component.

Study group participants further felt that staff participating in this programme would benefit from a professional mentoring relationship with experienced practitioners. This would give the participants the advantage of working with someone who he/she has established a good working relationship, in an environment that is more conducive to discussing the theories and applying them to local issues. Thus, it was recommended:

- that a mentorship programme be developed to assist participants in the learning process.

To maximize results, a model for a comprehensive learning programme was proposed for consideration. See Diagram 1.

Curriculum modalities

The study group further considered the duration of the programme, financial considerations and faculty.

- Duration: Even though the focus group recommended a strict time frame of nine to twelve months to complete the programme, respondents to the questionnaire felt this to be too restrictive. Smaller jurisdictions stated that they could not afford to have essential staff concentrate on a full course-load at the expense of their parliamentary work. More than a third (39 per cent) raised concerns of the time-cycle being too limited.

  For this reason, it was felt prudent to address these valid concerns with a more liberal timeframe. To be too restrictive may result in students abandoning courses or a high drop-out or failure rate.

Study group participants suggested that consideration could be given to accepting requests for extensions when substantiated by justifications and with the authority of a superior of their institution. However a time limit up to possibly three years should be established. Consequently, it was recommended:

"...The programme should...combine a theoretical and a practical approach, use a blended learning methodology of face-to-face training, a web-based learning, and possibly videoconferencing for its delivery."
that the programme follow a
nine to twelve month cycle but in
the event that circumstances do
not permit students to complete
the programme within that time
frame, consideration for extensions
for up to three years be granted.

Financial considerations: Cost
was a key driver in the discussions
by the Clerks. The results of the
questionnaire showed that
financial resources for staff
training are not increasing and for
smaller jurisdictions it is almost
inexistent. For this reason, it was
stressed that the programme be
affordable. (Pursuant to its
mandate, WBI would facilitate the
development and assist in the
oversight of the programme but it
cannot fund individuals or
universities). Sources of funding
for enrollment would have to be
provided by participating
Parliaments with possible financial
assistance from donors partners.
The study group recommended:

that selection of partners and
funding modalities be explored and
determined in accordance with
WBI’s past funding experiences,
policies and procedures.

A rough estimate indicates that
annual programme delivery would
cost approximately Can. $150,000.
Assuming an initial enrollment of
25 participants, fees of
approximately Can. $6000 per
participant would be necessary to
ensure financial self-sustainability.

Faculty: The Study Group
believed that the programme,
bringing together theoretical
thinking and practical experience,
local experiences and international
perspective, would be inspired by a
team of experts. These experts
would have to combine theoretical
and practical skills and should
represent a high level of expertise
in Parliament and its role in
democratic governance.

Programme designers, it was
recommended, should recognize
the necessity for the courses to
address the local/regional
concerns of Parliaments. It
considered important that, even
though the programme would have
a “home-base” at a recognized
university:
that the programme faculty be knowledgeable of Parliament and its role in democratic governance, and

that when possible, these instructors/facilitators be selected from different countries

2. An international executive programme for parliamentary staff
McGill University's Institute for the Study of International Development has offered to pilot an executive development programme for parliamentary staff reflecting the above principles on a cost-recovery (no profit) trial basis. Willing to work with partners, it has also offered to help find sponsors to help reduce tuition costs, especially for participants from developing countries.

The programme broadly mirrors the recommendations from the study group and takes into account many of the suggestions from survey respondents (see Diagram 2). It comprises three elements:

i) a one-week intensive residence programme, to be held at McGill University's main campus in downtown Montreal (scheduled to take place in June 2012); see Table 1.

ii) five of eight e-Learning courses on democratic principles, how parliament works and particular skills required by parliamentary staff; and

iii) two elective e-Learning courses on contemporary development issues.

Three unique features of the programme are a required case study or applied research project by participants on their own Parliament; on-going mentorship by experienced parliamentary staff and other practitioners throughout the programme and the possibility of a short-term attachment to another Parliament.

The programme is summarized in Diagram 2:

Tuition costs of the programme have been set as low as possible, and currently are Can. $5,995 (plus applicable taxes). Special team savings of $500 per person are available when two or more people from the same organization register at the same time. In addition, tuition bursaries (of up to $1,000) are available to highly qualified applicants from developing countries.

In the spirit of inclusiveness, CPA, WBI and McGill are reaching out to other parliamentary strengthening organizations to partner in the programme. To date, the Parliamentary Centre and the State University of New York (SUNY-CID) are committed...should recognize the necessity for the courses to address the local/regional concerns of Parliaments.”
partners and discussions are ongoing with the University of Laval and the Centre for Democratic Institutions in Australia. For further information contact Rick Stapenhurst at Frederick.Stapenhurst@McGill.ca.

Diagram 2: International Executive Programme for Parliamentary Staff

Building Capacity

Knowledge of democratic principles

Knowledge of how Parliament works

Skills in managing in a parliamentary setting

E Learning Courses*
1. Parliamentary governance

E Learning Courses
2. Public financial mgt., the budget and Parliament
3. Committees

E Learning Courses
4. Corporate management
5. Communications
6. IT
7. Research
8. Leg. draft

One week residency: practical and theoretical components
Parliamentary democracy; government accountability; core functions of Parliaments – legislation, oversight representation; corporate management of Parliament; parliamentary procedure; plus guest speakers

Two Elective E* Learning courses on contemporary issues from:
9. Parliament and the media
10. Controlling corruption
11. Climate change
12. Extractive industries

Integrative mechanisms
Case study/research project of personal or local interest
On-going mentorship
Short-term attachment to another Parliament