

# Library services to Members of Parliament in Singapore

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**Abstract** The objectives of this paper are to, firstly, provide an overview of the library services to the Members of Parliament, and secondly, to examine the profile of its key user group and study the surveys conducted on users' information seeking behaviors. Through listing the common findings and drawing up key conclusions, initiatives for the parliament library are identified.

## I Introduction

Singapore is a republic with a total land area of 710.3 square kilometres, with one main island and 63 offshore islands. It has a population size of 5.3 million (as of June 2012) comprising diverse ethnic groups - the main groups being the Chinese, Malays, Indians and the Eurasians. English is the main business language and is one of the official languages apart from Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. The head of state is the President with veto powers on key decisions such as the use of national reserves. The executive powers rest with the Cabinet led by the Prime Minister. The Parliament serves as the legislative authority responsible for enacting legislation.

### Parliament of Singapore – historical background

The origins of Parliament in Singapore can be traced back to 1867 when the Straits Settlements becomes a British Crown Colony and a Governor is appointed by the British Colonial Office to rule the colony with the aid of an Executive Council. A Legislative Council is appointed with legislative authority and comprises the Governor, Chief Justice, the Attorney General and other European officers. Almost a hundred years later after the Second World War, and a brief period of merger with Malaysia, Singapore declares its independence as a democratic nation on 9 August 1965.

### Parliamentary System in Singapore

The Singapore Parliament is based on the Westminster style of parliament with a unicameral system. The life of the Parliament is five years and upon the dissolution of Parliament, a general election must be conducted to elect its Members, the candidate or team of candidates with the highest number of votes is declared as the winner and elected into Parliament.

In the Singapore Constitution, there are three categories of Members in Parliament: elected Members voted in through the general elections (GE), non-constituency Members (NCMP) who are not elected in the same GE but has the highest percentage of votes won amongst defeated candidates; and nominated Members (NMP) who are appointed into Parliament for a term of two-and-a-half years by the President of Singapore on the nomination of a

Parliamentary Committee of Selection made up of elected Members. The number of NCMPs and NMPs allowed are subject to a limit as specified by law.

A Speaker is elected at the opening of every Parliament. S/he presides over the parliamentary sittings and enforces the rules of debate and other parliamentary proceedings as prescribed in the Standing Orders. The Speaker also heads the Secretariat of Parliament who supports the Parliament in its administration of business and proceedings, including supporting the work undertaken by the various Standing Select Committees.

### Structure of the Parliament Secretariat

The Clerk of Parliament oversees the daily administration of the Secretariat and is the principal advisor on parliamentary procedures. As of 2012, there is 52 full-time staff working in the nine departments in the Secretariat. The Parliament Library forms one of the departments with a staff strength of 4 full time officers, including two professional librarians under the employment of National Library Board. The Library department manages the Parliament Library and its collection and handles the reference and information queries from Members among other responsibilities. Public education and tours are under the purview of the Education and Publicity Department which also runs the Parliament's visitor centre.

## II The Parliament Library of Singapore

### Introduction

The Parliament Library is established in 1955. At present, it is managed by two professional librarians and supported by two corporate support officers who assisted in the daily operations of the library. The Parliament Library is used primarily by Members, members' legislative assistants and officers in the Parliament Secretariat office. Other users include former Members of Parliament. Researchers may apply to use the library on an appointment basis.

The Library has a floor area of about 820 square metres with a reading space with tables and can seat up to 40 Members. Two small rooms are available for Members to hold their private discussion and research. The Library is enabled with high speed WI-FI access which allows Members to work on their laptops and mobile devices while in the Library. Library services that Members enjoy include: quick enquiry service, reference service, book loans, use of research rooms and reading areas with Internet access and general assistance.

### Collection

The Library is a repository for all parliamentary publications related to Singapore. Besides the parliamentary publications, it has a small collection of books in subject areas related to politics, parliamentary matters, government and governance, law, constitution, Singapore heritage and history. Books which are not available can be loaned through inter-library loan arrangements with libraries in Singapore including the university libraries, specialist libraries in the Ministries and National Library of Singapore. Collection of the Library is

estimated at 20,000 volumes of books, journals, legislation, parliamentary publications and reports.

Online databases are offered via the Library Portal which is accessible by Members, Members' assistants, and officers in the Parliament Secretariat. Databases and reports subscribed by the Library include Nexis, Newslink and EIU Country reports. Members can also access newspaper clippings, parliamentary debates, and links to useful resources on statistical information in the Portal.

Most of these electronic resources are accessible within the Library and off-site. Updates on current news, journals and new books are sent regularly to the Members for their information. To build awareness of current issues, the librarians peruse daily newspapers and maintain a collection of relevant newspaper clippings, on parliamentary procedures, politics and government, law, health, economics, environment, crime, community issues and others.

### Enquiries

Enquiries from Members are received in many modes: over the counter, through telephone, through personal messaging platform and over email. Enquiries are answered in strict confidence and the library is committed to providing a first reply by the next working day. If additional time is needed, the user will be informed.

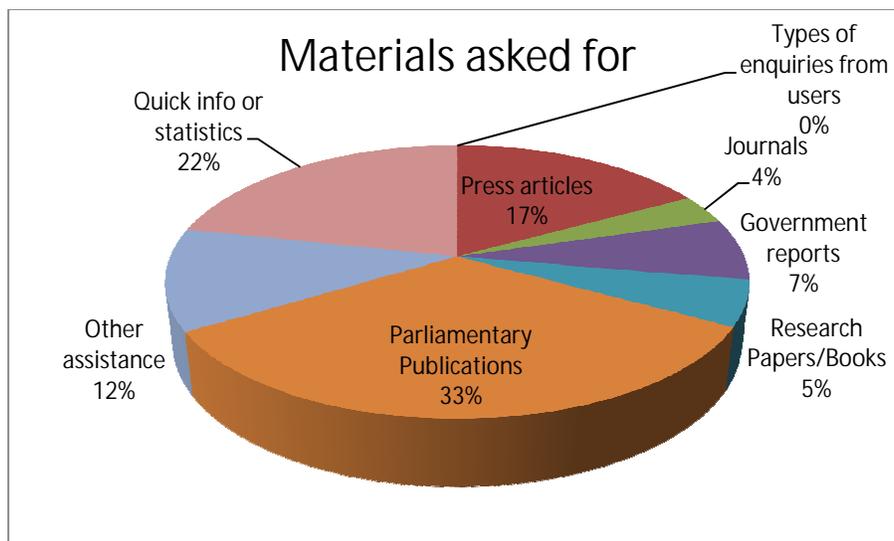


Chart 1. Materials asked for by Members

Chart 1 is an illustration of types of materials asked for, based on the enquiries received by the Library via email. Although email enquiries constitute only one portion of total enquiries received, it gives an indication on the information needs of the user and the perceived value of the library. The top three areas of requests received in 2011 and 2012 are related to past parliamentary speeches and questions, enquiries on statistical information and verification of information, and enquiries on newspaper articles and

current information. Many of the enquiries relate to historical factual information and statistics related to parliament. This shows the need of users and the value of the librarians to provide authoritative answers to factual questions.

#### Library Projects

Providing online access to users is becoming an important focus for the library, as its users are increasingly more IT savvy and use of mobile devices to access information is becoming common. Over the past two years, the Library focuses its efforts on digitising its collection of old parliamentary papers and has since digitised its collection on old legislative council reports, order papers and votes and proceedings. Its next step is to work on improving the users' access to these collections through consolidating all the digital materials in one repository and indexing the items to facilitate search. Another initiative by the Library is to enhance the Library Management System to increase ease and productivity in managing the Library collection.

#### Importance of partnership and collaboration

Collaboration and partnership has allowed the Library to focus and expand its collection in its identified core subject areas and at the same time catering to the needs of users on other subjects by leveraging on other libraries' collection. The Library has inter-library loan agreements with a number of institutions such as the National Library, government libraries and law libraries. Recently, a project with National Library Board and National Archives enabled the Parliament Library to fill its gap on legislative materials during Singapore's founding years.

#### Key challenge faced

Being a small parliament library has its set of challenges. It has to be very selective in the services and collection that it offers and given the competing resources, it can only focus on the aspects most valued by Members. As more information is accessible online, the library is also competing with increasingly innovative information products in the market.

To stay relevant, the library needs to know and be aware of the information needs of the Members of the Parliament. In the next section, an attempt is made to draw and analyse the biographical profile of the Members of the 12th Parliament, who forms the core users of the Parliament Library.

### III Users of the Parliament Library – current Members of Parliament

The current composition of 99 Members of Parliament in Singapore is broken down as follows: 87 elected Members, 3 non-constituency and 9 nominated Members. Of these, 25 are female parliamentarians (or 25% of the total cohort).

Most Members continue to work in his or her own profession while being an MP and they juggle parliamentary responsibilities and constituency work with own professional and family responsibilities. As such, they are often in pressure of time but require timely current information to respond to their constituents and the media. To assist them in doing background research for their speeches and administrative work, backbench MPs may hire a

secretarial assistant and a legislative assistant who are usually freelance researchers and postgraduate students.

Biographical Profile of Members in the 12<sup>th</sup> Parliament

A typical length of service of Members of Parliament is about two to three terms which is about 10 to 15 years. Out of the total number of MPs, 38% are first term MPs, 40% are second and third term MPs, and 21% served more than three terms.

Number of terms served	% of total Members
First term	38%
Second term	25%
Third term	15%
Four terms and above	22%

Table 1. Parliamentary terms served by Members (in percentage)

More than half (63%) of the Members are less than 50 years old when elected or nominated; with the youngest Member elected at 28 years old (Chart 2). The average age of a Member is 47 years old. All Members have a tertiary education; the majority has at least a bachelor's degree, with many of them holding masters and doctorate degrees (Chart 3).

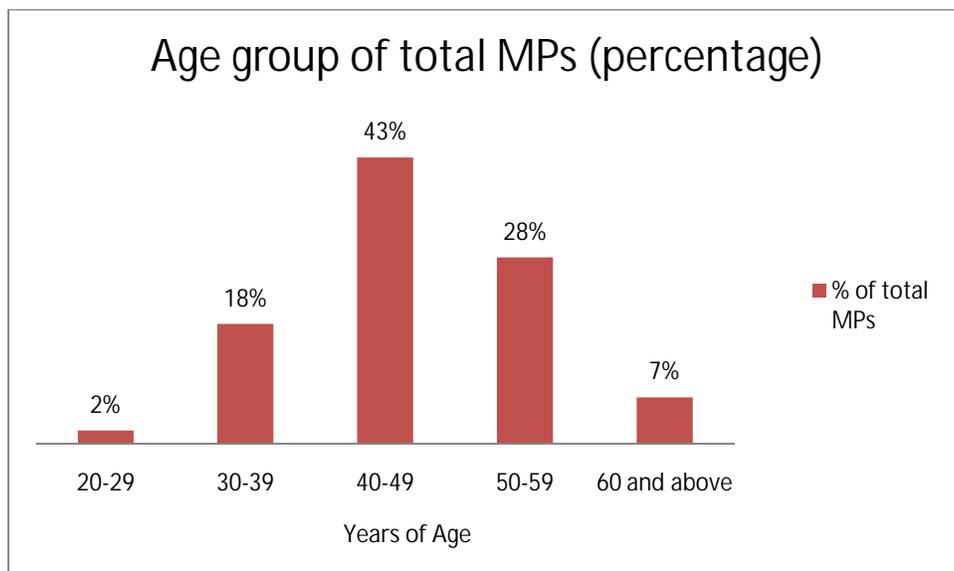


Chart 2. Age group of Members

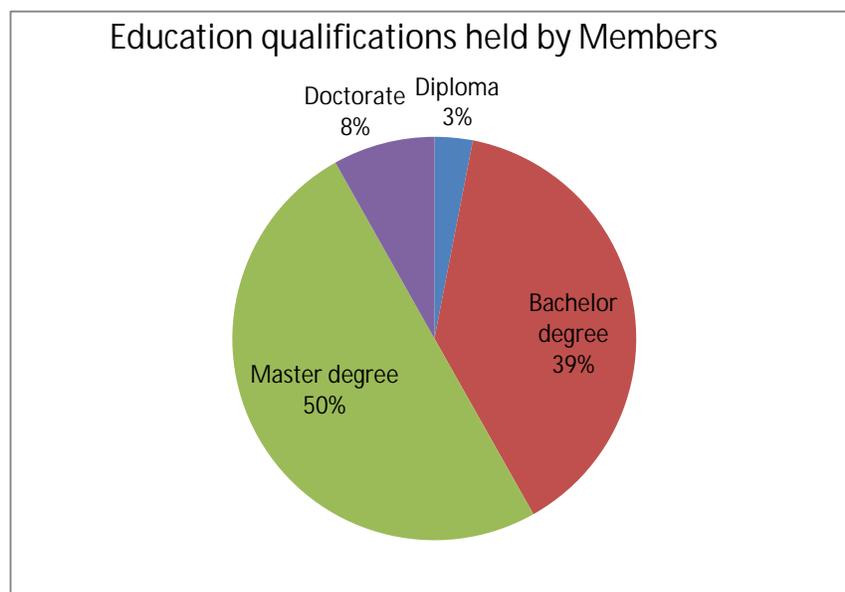


Chart 3. Education qualifications held by Members

Topics raised

Parliamentary questions asked by Members since the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> Parliament is collated and the results reflect Members' interest and current issues faced by the nation. The top ten topics most asked from October 2011 to May 2013 are:

Rank	Topics
1	Housing and Property
2	Transportation
3	Healthcare
4	Immigration and Population
5	Education
6	Government subsidies and incentives
7	Finance and economy
8	Manpower and Training
9	Environment
10	Social and community development

Table 2. Topics most frequently asked by Members

The information collated on the top ten subject interest will be useful for the Library to target and plan its collection maintenance and development.

From the above findings, it is inferred that:

- The Members of Parliament are a highly educated group of users, which implies the relative efficiency and access to information
- There is a relatively high number of Members in their first term, so orientation and induction courses on parliamentary materials are an important focus for the library
- Most Members (43%) fall under the 40-49 age groups, but there is also a sizeable percentage (35%) of Members above 50 years old. This indicates a mix of different generation of users familiar with electronic information sources and those used to print resources. However, it can be expected that the generation of Members familiar with electronic sources will increase over time and hence demand for such materials will increase

#### IV Review of information need surveys on Members

Members are expected by the society and their electorates to perform their representative and legislative roles. To perform these roles adequately, Members thus need to equip themselves with the relevant information to ask the right questions in Parliament and make meaningful debates and contributions to issues<sup>1</sup>.

What are the information needs of Members? Studies and observations have been conducted with parliamentarians to learn and study their behaviours and preference in information seeking. Pertinent findings from selected studies in the United Kingdom, South Africa and most recently Malaysia are drawn<sup>2</sup>:

- Newspapers and newspaper clippings are one of the most often used resource in the Library, followed by government reports/magazines [South Africa, Malaysia]
- Members commonly obtain their information through personal sources, which can be surmised that their preferred sources of information are from individuals whom they trust and have confidence in. However, the authentication and quality of the information from their personal sources is not always guaranteed [Malaysia, South Africa]
- Awareness of current affairs and issues are crucial and Members need to be updated on a daily if not regular basis [South Africa]
- Members use a wide range of information sources, which demonstrate importance of flexibility in approach to information seeking and need for them to filter effectively the information available [UK]
- Members have little control over the subject areas in which s/he has to quickly be an expert in, in order to respond to public and media demands. Hence, information needs are reactive, rushed and unsystematic in many cases [UK]

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<sup>1</sup> Szarina, A., Husnita, H. (2012). The information needs and information use of Malaysia's Members of Parliament, p. 4

<sup>2</sup> The three surveys are: The information needs and information use of Malaysia's Members of Parliament (Malaysia), An observation study of the information seeking behaviour of Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom (United Kingdom), Information needs and information seeking behaviour of parliamentarians in South Africa (South Africa).

- Previous experience in information rich environments play an important bearing on the Members' ability to cope and understand the issues quickly with some degree of depth [UK]
- Due to workload, Members have little time to effectively search unassisted through all the information available to them. The amount of unfiltered information that resulted from a search can lead to frustration and unnecessary stress. A gatekeeper is needed to filter the information [South Africa]

From the discussion, some conclusions are drawn which are applicable to the Parliament Library:

- Newspaper articles and clippings, in both print and electronic form, remain one of the most important collection and valued resource in the Library
- Most Members need gatekeepers to help in filtering the massive amount of information; the gatekeepers can be in the form of library staff or members' legislative assistants. Training and orientation is thus necessary to support the gatekeepers' role
- Members and their assistants need to know the importance of authenticated information, and librarians have the capability and should establish the trust and confidence with Members to market this attribute
- Timeliness to information is extremely important. Users value access to information - faster, easier and more user friendly – and take this as more important than adding increments of quality to library products<sup>3</sup>

## V Conclusion

The findings in Section IV affirm that the parliament library's focus on newspaper and current affairs should continue. To develop further, the library can tap on its knowledge and explore the use of information technology and available databases which can package and customize key headlines and information for the busy parliamentarians. Further information packaging can be done to the news clippings maintained by the library staff in the Library Portal.

The biographical profile research in Section II enables the Library to understand and apply the knowledge for planning on its service delivery. One initiative that can be explored is to leverage on information analytics to generate statistics on questions asked by the Members and use the information to build and expand the library's collection on pertinent subject areas.

In summary, the parliament library can still play an important role by providing a dedicated service for Members and assurance that the enquiries are kept confidential, and by providing information from authoritative sources. Being part of parliament, the library can anticipate and respond effectively to cater to the information needs of the Members at their pace. It is constantly reminded though, that the pace and needs of Members change dynamically over time and hence regular reviews are necessary on the way the Parliament Library disseminates and provides accessibility to information.

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<sup>3</sup> Watt, I. Changing visions of parliamentary libraries: From the Enlightenment to Facebook.

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This paper expresses the personal views of the author and does not represent the official view of the organization.