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SURVEY ON THE UTILISATION OF PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH UNIT PRODUCTS

*Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices around research utilisation at the
Parliament of South Africa*

FINAL REPORT

**For submission to Parliament's Research Unit
and Knowledge and Information Services Division**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research in a parliamentary setting has different connotations than it does in an academic setting. Academic research tends to focus on pure primary research, or long-lasting endeavours to discover truth and fundamental relationships in society to advance knowledge and understanding. Research for a legislature is more applied in nature - seeking to draw on a wide range of existing knowledge and then synthesise it into a form that is useful for busy parliamentarians and apply it to the understanding and solution of specific problems. The Parliament of South Africa's (Parliament) Strategic Plan for the 6th Parliament states that the institution "needs adequate support in the form of generation, collation and analysis of data sets, specialist policy and research staff that can conduct both issue- or action-orientated research, and in-depth research to support parliamentary committees and brief parliamentarians."

A parliamentary stakeholder survey, conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2019, indicated that there was a decrease in overall satisfaction from Members of Parliament (MP) regarding the service offerings and support Members. As such, the Parliamentary Research Unit (PRU) conducted this survey to gauge the level to which this dissatisfaction extends to the research support that MPs receive. The survey had a broader scope than just measuring MP satisfaction, and focused in addition on developing a deeper understanding of how MPs engage with PRU output (research products) and broader MP engagement with research.

A total of 53 respondents took part in the survey of which 52 completed the survey and one failed to complete the survey. Parliament consists of 400 MPs in the National Assembly (NA) and 90 in the National Council of Provinces (NCOP). As such, the 52 completed surveys provide a response rate of 10.61%. The key focus of the survey was on MP's perceptions, attitudes and preferences as it relates to services offered by the PRU. The Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) approach was employed as the research design as it was appropriate to test the knowledge, attitudes and practices of MPs in relation to the PRU, its products and the utilisation of research in general.

The findings of the study indicate, amongst others, that the overall sentiment around PRU support is positive. Members show a good understanding of the role of PRU, largely view it as impartial and the overwhelming majority confirm receiving information from researchers regularly. However, some Members still have a misconception of the services offered by the PRU and how its functions differ from those of Content Advisors. There is also scope for improvement in the service offerings and the marketing of the PRU as a non-partisan research support entity. The inclusion of external research, outside the ambit of Parliament, and interconnection with external research institutions offer further opportunities for the PRU. While the overall response remains positive, the findings suggest that there is room for improvement. As such, this Report makes several recommendations to enhance the support rendered by the PRU.



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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

BRRR:	Budget Review and Recommendation Reports
HSRC:	Human Sciences Research Council
KAP:	Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices
MPs:	Members of Parliament
MTBPS:	Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement
MTSF:	Medium Term Strategic Framework
NA:	National Assembly
NCOP:	National Council of Provinces
PRU:	Parliamentary Research Unit
SONA:	State of the Nation Address
SOP:	Standard Operating Procedure
TOR:	Terms of Reference
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development
WBI:	World Bank Institute



1. INTRODUCTION

Parliament's Strategic Plan for the 6th Parliament states that the institution “needs adequate support in the form of generation, collation and analysis of data sets, specialist policy and research staff that can conduct both issue- or action-orientated research, and in-depth research to support parliamentary committees and brief parliamentarians.” The research function has been well entrenched through the establishment of the Parliamentary Research Unit (PRU) and it has shown its ability to deliver information to MPs through continuously achieving its required output. In 2019/20, for example, the Unit provided 99.9% of its research requirements within the required time, against a target of 95%, and a total of 1 010 research and information papers were delivered to MPs during the same year. Similarly, in 2020/21, the PRU produced 1 392 papers and met 100% of its submission deadlines.¹

A stakeholder survey conducted for Parliament by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2018/19 indicated decreasing overall satisfaction from MPs regarding service offerings and support to MPs.² Nonetheless, the PRU has outperformed its set targets in subsequent surveys. In the most recent 2021/22 stakeholder survey, the PRU scored a Member satisfaction level of 81.13% against a target of 70%.³ While this score exceeds the target, it still demonstrates scope for improved service provision. The Member satisfaction survey also does not provide much detail of the reasons for Members' ratings. As such, there seems to be a disconnect between improvement in research support provided to MPs and actual customer satisfaction. It is therefore of value to determine whether the research support delivered by the PRU to MPs is displayed, compiled, delivered and accessed in a way that encourages MP use and engagement. Obtaining this knowledge would allow the PRU to adjust its product display, delivery and presentation in line with MPs' needs, which should contribute to improved oversight. This survey therefore contributes to Section 2.5.4 of the Strategic Plan for the 6th Parliament that views the improvement of committee scrutiny and oversight work as a strategic priority.⁴

As such, in an effort to better understand how MPs engage with PRU output and research in general, a survey was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of how MPs engage with the output (research products) prepared by the PRU. Utilising a well-established survey methodology, the key objectives of the survey aimed to determine the following:

- What are the perceptions of MPs of the current PRU products?
- What is the attitude of MPs towards the PRU and its research products?
- What are MP preferences when it comes to evidence use and how do they engage with internal and external research and evidence?

¹ Information provided by the PRU from collated reporting statistics.

² HSRC (2019).

³ Parliament of the Republic of South Africa (2022). pp, 9-10.

⁴ Parliament of the Republic of South Africa (2020) p. 25.



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Locating Parliamentary Research Services

Research in a parliamentary setting has different connotations than it does in an academic setting. Academic research tends to focus on primary research, or long-lasting endeavours to discover truth and fundamental relationships in society to advance knowledge and understanding. Research for legislatures is more applied in nature - seeking to draw on a wide range of existing knowledge and then synthesise it into a form that is useful for busy parliamentarians and apply it to the understanding and solution of specific problems.

According to the World Bank Institute (WBI), the role of a Parliamentary Research Service is to search for the right information, integrate it with other materials, synthesize (and analyse) it and translate it into non-technical terms and disseminate it to all parliamentarians in a form that is as objective, (balanced) and as non-partisan as possible.⁵

The purpose of a Parliamentary Research Service is thus to provide non-partisan and balanced analysis that is adapted to the needs of MPs.⁶ The key functions of an MP include, among others, law-making and oversight over the executive arm of government. As such, their ability to perform these roles within the policy and legislative cycle is often shaped by their access to authoritative and reliable information. MPs should therefore be equipped to execute their mandate by having access to authoritative and concise material that presents synthesis and analysis of the relevant facts necessary for them to intervene effectively, often at short notice, on public policy issues addressed by a parliament.

The work of MPs is information intensive and Members must quickly grasp complex concepts, technical matters and policy options. They must also engage meaningfully and knowledgeably with the Executive, government experts, organised civil society and the public at large.⁷ The ability to obtain relevant, accurate and reliable information in real-time would greatly enhance the work of MPs' knowledge and documented best practices would enhance decision-making resulting in more sustainable law-making and oversight outcomes.

Members of Parliament represent the interests of the citizenry in government through the processes of law-making, oversight over Executive performance, holding the Executive accountable and international participation. The role of a Parliamentary Research Service is to provide neutral analysis covering the spectrum of perspectives through products and services that are non-partisan and offered to governing and opposition parties alike. As the modern democratic government has evolved to a higher degree of complexity, such representation requires the provision of several different streams of information, involving vast quantities of information. More effective scrutiny and recommendations will require enhanced synthesis, analysis and research services.

The information and analysis provided by a Parliamentary Research Service should provide deeper insights into issues, and empower Members to effect deeper scrutiny. The

⁵ Muller (2004).

⁶ IPU (2015).

⁷ Parliament (2021).



Parliamentary Research Service thus assists MPs by preparing synthesis and analysis of proposed legislation, policies or programmes considered by Parliament. To strengthen oversight in Parliament, there is a need to deliver more insightful research and analysis that is informed by and closely aligned to the needs of MPs. Parliament's Knowledge Management Strategy thus emphasises the critical role of improved research and analysis to provide deeper insights.

2.2 Overview of the South African Parliamentary Research Unit

The mission of the PRU is to provide research and information services to Members of Parliament, Committees and senior management professionally and objectively. The Research Unit is guided by the following principles:

- Non-partisanship and impartiality;
- Objectivity;
- Accessible;
- Confidentiality; and
- Quality.

The PRU developed a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) which highlights the support rendered by the Unit.⁸ The PRU mainly responds reactively (i.e. on demand) to the research needs of its clients timeously. It also facilitates the work of its clients by anticipating their research needs and responding to these proactively. At the request of its clients, the Unit provides a number of services. Support is offered to Individual MPs; Committees; Delegations; Sectoral Parliaments (Youth and Women Parliaments); Parliamentary programmes of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) including Taking Parliament to the People, Provincial Week, Local Government Week, and Parliamentary projects.

The primary research product outputs generated by the PRU include, amongst others, the following:

- State of the Nation Address (SONA) analysis;
- Budget analysis from a sectoral angle;
- Strategic Plans and Annual Performance Plans (of government departments) analysis;
- Quarterly expenditure and Performance report analysis;
- Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) analysis;
- Annual Report analysis;
- Input in Budget Review and Recommendation Reports (BRRR);
- Legislative analysis;
- Background papers for oversight visits;
- Policy analysis;
- Research papers on sector-specific topics arising from Committee programmes;
- Comparative studies;
- Draft conference papers;

⁸ Parliament of RSA (2018).



- Draft delegation reports (if researcher accompanies a delegation);
- Papers for international participation;
- Analytical oversight reports;
- Analysis of international instruments, e.g. treaties, conventions, etc.

In addition, the PRU conducts proactive research briefs that are either initiated by an individual researcher or a team of researchers in an inter-sectoral approach. Proactive research briefs are informed by, amongst others, the programme of a particular Committee/s, resolutions adopted by regional and international parliamentary fora and current and forthcoming issues in the public discourse requiring Parliament's attention. Proactive research products can take the form of any of the reactive products listed above.

In some instances, research projects are commissioned to researchers and/or institutions outside of Parliament. The decision to commission research is usually based on the fact that the PRU does not have the required human resources to undertake a particular project or the necessary specialist expertise required for the particular project. The PRU's role in commissioning research involves drafting terms of reference, liaising with service providers and consulting on progress.

Researchers further attend Committee meetings on a regular basis and provide research input or advice as requested. They also attend Committee management meetings and provide briefings to individuals or groups of clients. In addition, the PRU produces two annual documents which comprise a sectoral response to the SONA and the Budget. These publications serve as monitoring and oversight tools for Members and Committees of Parliament.

The PRU provides research support for oversight visits and study tours of Committees. This support includes the preparation of briefing documents for Members of delegations, the presentation of such briefing documents to delegation Members where required, as well as providing on-site research support to delegation Members during visits. In addition, the PRU prepares analytical and delegation reports, as the case might be, on oversight visits and study tours as well as parliamentary assemblies.

The PRU also provides institutional research support for Sectoral Parliaments and parliamentary projects, such as the Women's Parliament, Youth Parliament, People's Assembly and Taking Parliament to the People. This includes participation in the process of conceptualising the frameworks for such sectoral parliaments and parliamentary projects, attending planning and briefing meetings, preparing concept documents and attending task team meetings. The PRU also provides content support at sectoral parliaments and assists in the development of draft conference resolutions/declarations where required. The PRU provides content input into the evaluation of sectoral parliaments and prepares analyses of such evaluations.



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Project stages

The survey was conducted in several phases as outlined below:

October 2021: Terms of Reference

The final Terms of Reference of the project were submitted to the Senior Researcher (Ms Nadia Dollie) and the Chief Researcher (Dr Gilbert Wesso) for approval.

October 2021 – January 2022: Task Team establishment and survey construction

A Survey Task Team was established consisting of selected researchers from each cluster at the PRU. The main duty of the Task Team was to conceptualise the survey and refine the questions to be included for MPs. The Task Team was instrumental in ensuring the distribution of the survey to MPs via the researchers in their cluster. The Task Team consisted of the following researchers:

- Dr Agnetha Arendse
- Ms Lee Bramwell
- Mr Nhlanhla Ginindza
- Mr Mbuyiselo Hlekiso
- Dr Wilhelm Janse van Rensburg
- Ms Tasneem Matthews
- Ms Inez Stephney

February – March 2022: Establishing institutional buy-in

The project was presented to the Divisional Manager: Knowledge and Information Services, Dr Leon Gabriel, who liaised for the project to be introduced at the House Chairperson's Forum.

March – June 2022: Data collection

The survey was opened for participation by MPs on 22 March 2022 and remained active until 3 June 2022. The distribution method included the use of parliamentary researchers who forwarded the survey to Members of the various committees they are assigned to, either themselves or through committee secretaries. In addition, weekly Information Alerts were sent out to MPs with a reminder to partake in the survey.

June – August 2022: Report compilation:

The Report Writing Team, as established by the survey Task Team, completed the first draft of the report by the end of August 2022.

Further phases: Results publication

As per the approved Terms of reference, the Writing Team will aim to publish the results of the study in a peer-reviewed academic journal to share the data obtained with a wider audience which may directly or indirectly contribute to the support offered to MPs in their parliamentary functions.



3.2 Research methodology and design

The research project made use of a survey as a data collection means. Given the aims of the research project to gain a deeper understanding of the manner in which MPs engage with the output (research products) prepared by the PRU, a survey is an appropriate research method. Babbie and Mouton note that “survey research is probably the best method available to social scientists interested in collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe directly.”⁹ With the National Assembly (NA) comprising of 400 MPs and the NCOP comprising of 90 MPs, direct observation is not possible and a survey therefore provides a well-suited research method.

3.3 Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP)

According to Kaliyaperumal, the “KAP” study measures the Knowledge, Attitude and Practices of a community since it serves as an educational diagnosis of the community.¹⁰ The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) views it as a quantitative method with predefined questions that are formatted in standardised questionnaires that provides access to quantitative and qualitative information.¹¹ It further notes that a KAP survey essentially records an “opinion” and is based on statements.

Babbie and Mouton point out that “surveys are also excellent vehicles for measuring attitudes and orientations in large populations.”¹² This connection illustrates the appropriateness of using surveys when using the KAP approach to research design. KAP surveys are aimed at measuring human knowledge, attitudes and practices in relation to a specific intervention; in this case, parliamentary research products. KAP studies can “enhance the knowledge, attitude, and practices of specific themes [and] establish the baseline (reference value) for use in future assessments...”¹³ The use of a KAP study is therefore appropriate to test the knowledge, attitudes and practices of MPs in relation to the PRU, its products and the utilisation of research in general.

The survey questions were aligned with the KAP design approach and were therefore largely quantitative in nature. A standardised Likert scale was used to simplify respondent engagement. Most responses involved rating items on a limited response set consisting of the following ratings: 1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neutral; 4 – Agree; 5 - Strongly Agree. In addition, some questions requested more in-depth written feedback, which provides an element of qualitative value to the study.

In terms of ethical considerations, respondents were informed about the purpose of the survey and the questions were designed in such a way that it prevents the identification of respondents. All data was securely stored using the Google Forms facility, with only two researchers having access to the data set.

⁹ Babbie and Mouton (2011) p. 232

¹⁰ Kaliyaperumal (2004).

¹¹ USAID (2011).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gumucio (2011)



3.4 Limitations of the study

The study aimed at determining, inter alia, the perception of MPs around the PRU and its products. However, as demonstrated in the study, MPs may serve on various committees and the type of support and services they receive from the PRU may vary from one committee to the next. The survey did not make provision for this variation but gauged a general perception from MPs. Furthermore, the survey did not specifically focus on the needs of MPs with disabilities.

4. DEMOGRAPHIC AND RESPONDENT OVERVIEW

A total of 53 respondents took part in the survey of which 52 completed the survey and one failed to complete the survey. Parliament consists of 400 MPs in the NA and 90 in the NCOP. As such, the 52 completed surveys provide a response rate of 10.61%.

While it would be ideal for a survey of MPs to receive more than 52 responses, this response rate should be seen in context. First, the response rate compares very well to a survey of MPs conducted by the HSRC in 2019 which only received 32 responses from MPs.¹⁴ Second, while every effort was made to distribute the survey to all 490 MPs through Parliament's Info Alerts and via committee researchers, some MPs may not have received the survey due to their absence from Parliament during the period or IT-related problems. The actual response rate may therefore be higher than 10.61%. Third, the response rate of 10.61% falls within the industry norm of a 10-15% response rate¹⁵ for external surveys.¹⁶

The impact of the relatively low response rate is further mitigated by the highly representative nature of respondents, including the following:

- **Gender:** 46.2% female and 53.8% male
- **Age:**
 - 7.7% under 35
 - 15.4% aged 36 to 45
 - 30.8% aged 46 to 55
 - 34.6% aged 56 to 65
 - 11.5% over 65
- **NA/NCOP:** 41 MPs from the NA and 10 MP from the NA
(One respondent preferred not to say)
- **Party:** 27 MPs from the governing party and 24 MPs from opposition parties (One preferred not to say)

¹⁴ HSRC (2019) p. 12.

¹⁵ Fryrear (2015).

¹⁶ Although the study was conducted within one organisation, it can be viewed as an external study given that it was conducted by the PRU but the target audience was MPs and not the PRU itself, thus reflecting a different sphere of the institution.



- **Qualifications:**
 - 1 MP with Secondary School
 - 7 MPs with Matric
 - 14 MPs with port-matric qualifications
 - 27 MPs with post-graduate qualifications
 - (Three preferred not to say)

In addition to the representative nature in terms of gender, age, party affiliation and qualifications, respondents also serve in a variety of positions on parliamentary committees. As is noted in the figures below, most respondents were MPs that serve as regular Committee Members, which is aligned with the reality at Parliament. However, the survey managed to capture responses from a number of Chairpersons and Whips of committees. In addition, the survey also captured the views of MPs that serve on various committees as well as those that serve on a single committee, thus allowing for an array of views on the services rendered by the PRU (also note the limitations of the study in this regard noted in Section 3.3).

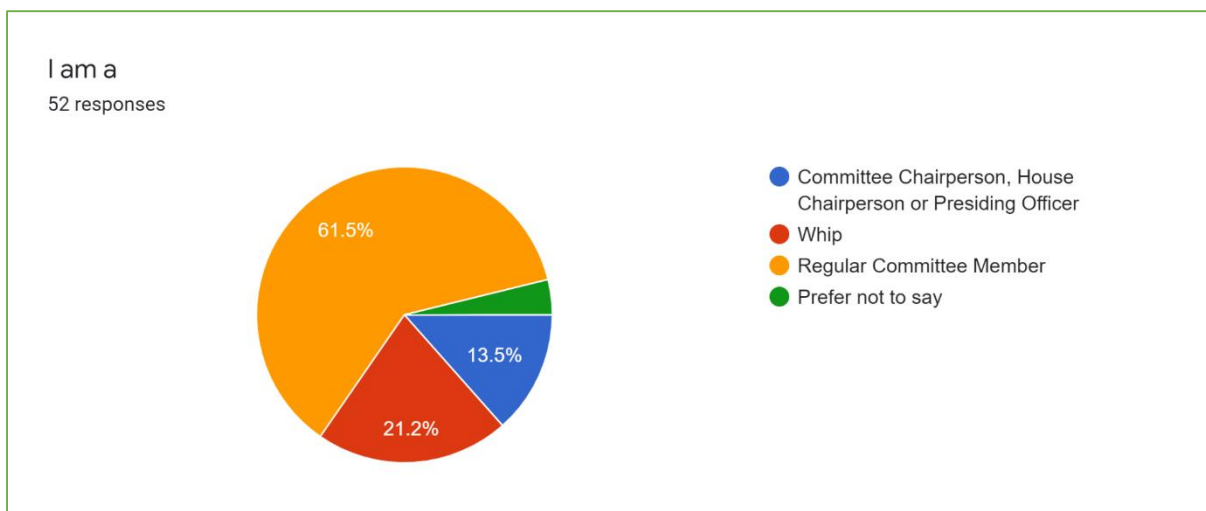


Figure 1: Respondents' positions in parliamentary committees

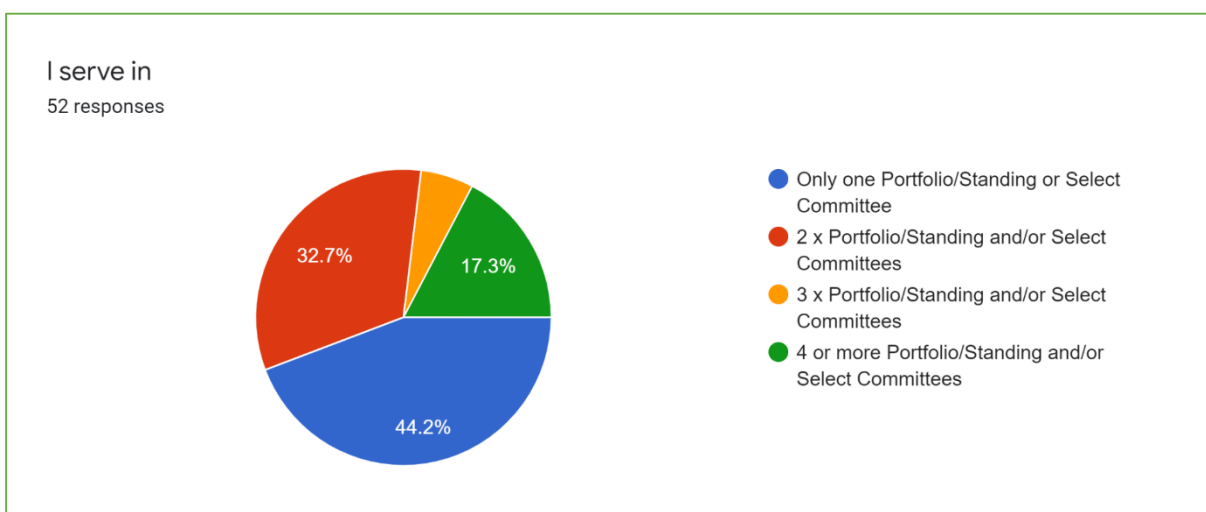


Figure 2: Respondents' committee allocation



5. KNOWLEDGE OF THE PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH UNIT

5.1 Knowledge of the PRU

The survey's inquiry commenced with a series of questions to determine to what extent MPs were aware of the PRU as well as the services they offer. 90.4% of MPs acknowledged that they know that Parliament has researchers that support MPs. The same number (90.4% of respondents) indicated that they are aware that the researchers belong to a designated PRU. It is concerning, however, that five MPs did not know that Parliament has researchers that support them, more so due to the fact that the survey was conducted in the middle of the 6th Parliament (2022), at a point when MPs should be familiar with the workings of the institution after it commenced in 2019.

The concern around MPs not being aware of researchers at Parliament and the PRU may, to an extent, relate to a lack of education about the Unit. The survey found that 51.9% of respondents recalled that the PRU was introduced to them during their induction as MPs. However, 36.5% of respondents do not recall whether the PRU was introduced to them while 11.5% of respondents indicated that the PRU was not presented to them during induction. These findings, and the fact that some MPs are still not aware of the PRU, highlight the need for ongoing education as to the existence of the PRU.

5.2 Knowledge of the PRU products and services

The survey posed two questions to determine MPs' understanding of (1) *who* the PRU supports and (2) *what* services the PRU offers. MPs showed a good understanding of who the PRU supports with the vast majority of respondents acknowledging that the PRU supports individual MPs, parliamentary committees and chairpersons. Only MPs' understanding of support to House Committee chairpersons fell slightly short with 44 of the 52 respondents acknowledging that the PRU provides support to House Committee chairpersons.

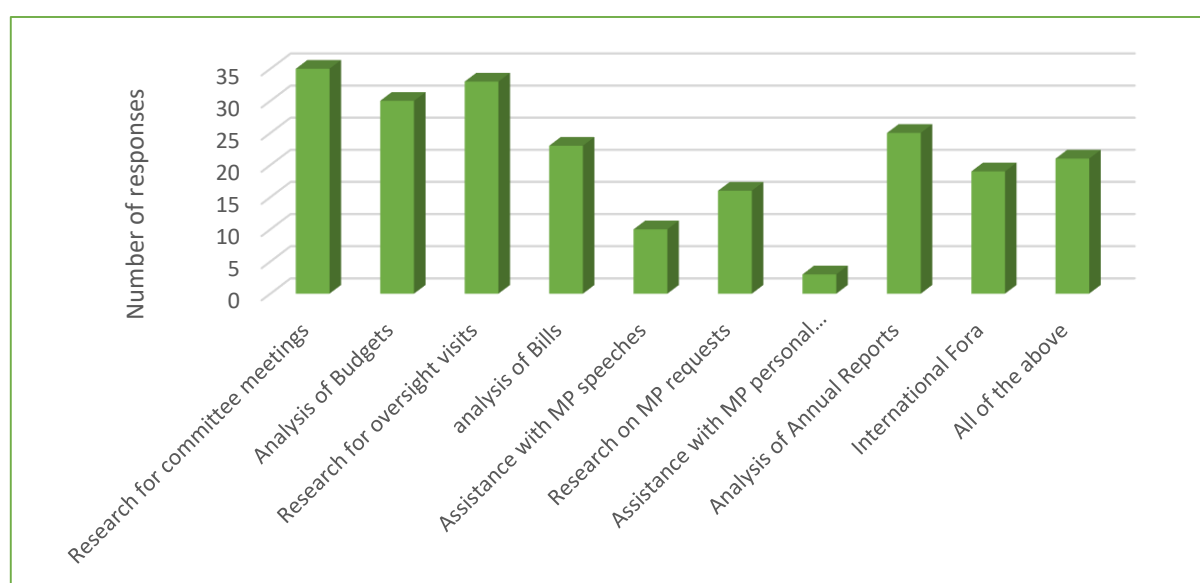


Figure 3: Knowledge of PRU services



In terms of the type of services offered by the PRU, MPs were also well aware of the various services offered, as reflected in Figure 3. Members seem to be most familiar with the PRU's provision of research documents for committee meetings, analyses of budgets and annual reports as well as research for oversight visits. MPs are slightly less familiar with the PRU's functions in the analysis of Bills and the provision of support to MP participation in international fora. Of specific concern is that fewer MPs were aware that the PRU provides research support based on individual MP requests. This concern is confirmed by the qualitative responses where some MPs indicated that the PRU does not adequately support individual MPs.

Although the PRU does not write speeches for MPs, it provides support to MPs in their preparation for speeches by providing Speaking Notes. The survey did, however, reflect that fewer MPs were aware of this service. The PRU does not, however, provide research assistance to MPs in support of their personal studies. Yet, the survey reflects a number of MPs that believed the PRU indeed provides this service. As such, while there is a good general understanding of the services that the PRU provides, there is scope for improvement and better marketing of the exact services that the PRU offers.

6. PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY RESEARCH UNIT

6.1 MP perceptions of the PRU

The survey aimed to establish MPs' perceptions of the PRU through a number of interrelated questions focusing on perceptions around PRU support and viewing the PRU against other related services. The section commenced with a question on whether MPs feel sufficiently supported by the PRU. Encouragingly, 73.1% of respondents felt that they were sufficiently supported by the PRU while 11.6% felt they were not sufficiently supported. Eight respondents (15.4%) remained neutral in their responses. Members who were dissatisfied with the support from the PRU were asked for reasons and the following pertinent aspects were listed which may require further attention:

- I am not convinced of accessibility to opposition members and have reservations about confidentiality.
- The services are not made freely available to individual MPs.
- I am not sure who to contact and believe the PRU is biased in favour of the ruling party.

The comments above also reflect a slightly elevated level of dissatisfaction among opposition MPs regarding levels of research support. Of the 24 opposition MP responses, four (18.2%) indicated that they do not feel sufficiently supported while a further four (18.2%) remained neutral in their response.

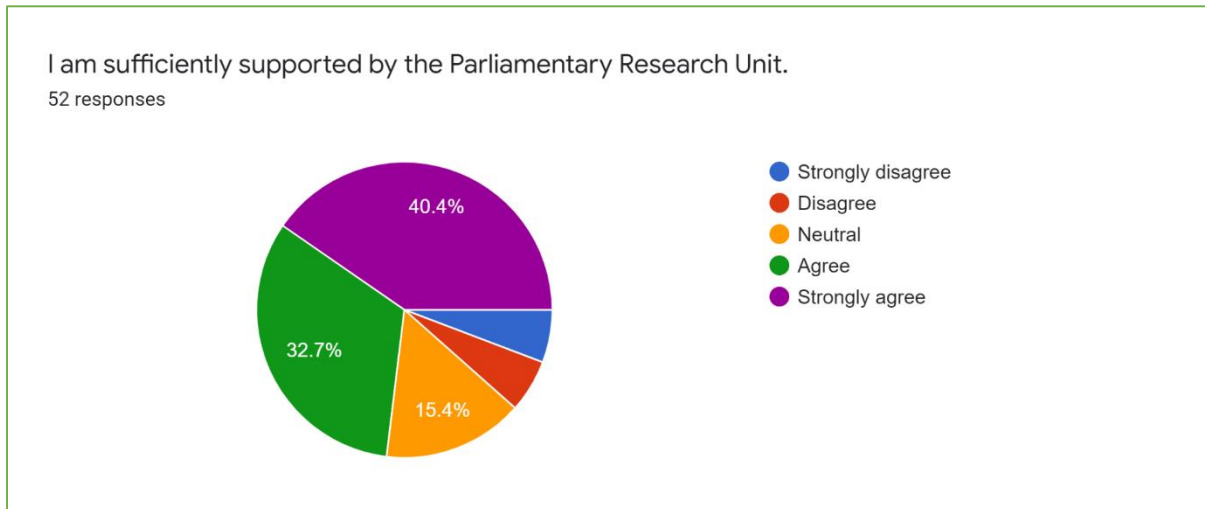


Figure 4: Level of PRU support satisfaction

The survey also gauged MPs' views of the impartiality of the PRU. While some MPs (as above) raised concerns about the PRU supporting the ruling party, the vast majority of respondents were of the view that the PRU is non-partisan and impartial. A total of 75% of respondents viewed the PRU as impartial, while 17% remained neutral in their response. Only 4 (7.7%) respondents felt that the PRU was not impartial. While the broad views of the PRU are therefore one of impartiality, the fact that some MPs still have reservations around this matter highlights the need for the PRU to continuously market itself as a non-partisan entity that offers services to *all* MPs, regardless of political affiliation.

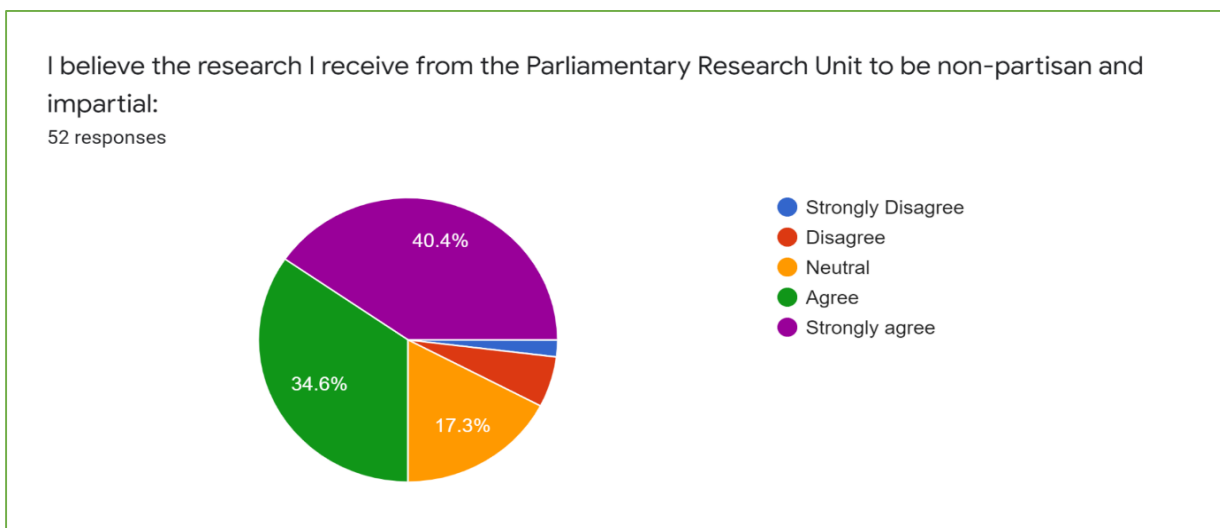


Figure 5: Level of PRU support satisfaction

Perceptions of the PRU should also be viewed in relation to other similar services offered to MPs. At the committee level, Content Advisors and Researchers represent the two positions that mostly provide content and advisory services. At least 88.5% of respondents said they are aware that Parliament assigns both Researchers and Content Advisors to each committee. Four respondents indicated that they were not sure whether both the support functions were



offered to each committee and only two respondents believed it to be false. However, the survey also engaged MP's understanding of the different roles of Researchers and Content Advisors as this has a bearing on the broader perception of the PRU and its institutional independence. A total of 14 respondents (28.9%) believed that Researchers and Content Advisors provide the same services while a further seven (13.5%) remained neutral in their response. This indicates a possible misconception among many MPs as to the various services offered by the PRU and how it contrasts with the functions of the Content Advisors. This may well require efforts to orientate MPs better as to the various services provided, which will enable them to more effectively use the two support services.

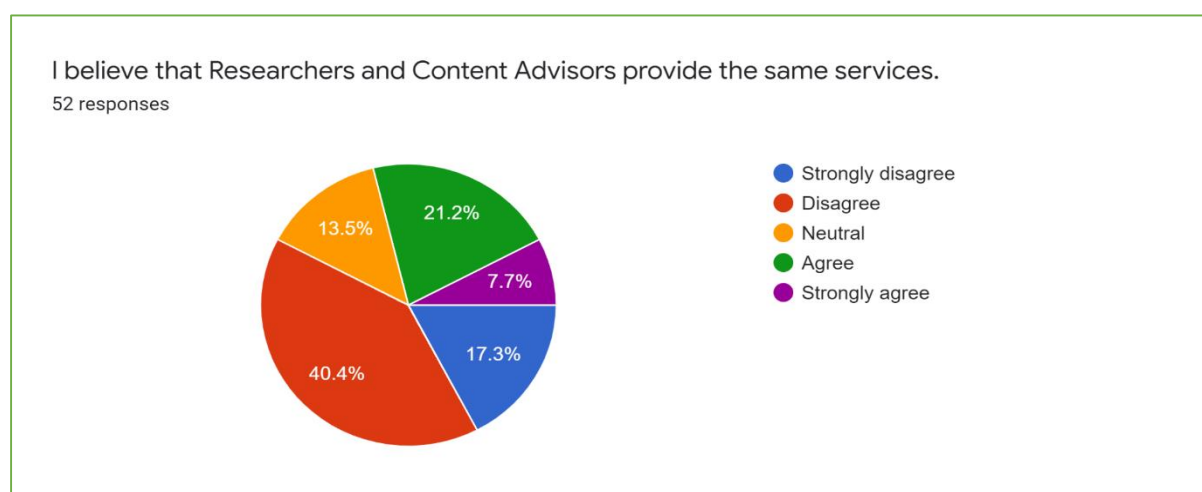


Figure 6: MP views on Researchers and Content Advisor services

6.2 MP perceptions of PRU services

The survey posed two related questions to MPs on the types of services offered by the PRU. First, it requested the instances where MPs are most in need of research assistance, including committee meetings; House debates; questions in the House; motions in the House; constituency work; committee oversight visits; international study tours; international delegations; and, participation in parliamentary sanctioned seminars and conferences. A total of 17 respondents (32%) indicated that they require research assistance in all of these instances. However, when all responses are considered, it is evident that MPs mostly require research support in terms of (1) *Committee meetings* and (2) *Committee oversight visits*. The areas where MPs least require research assistance include constituency work, motions in the House and international delegations.

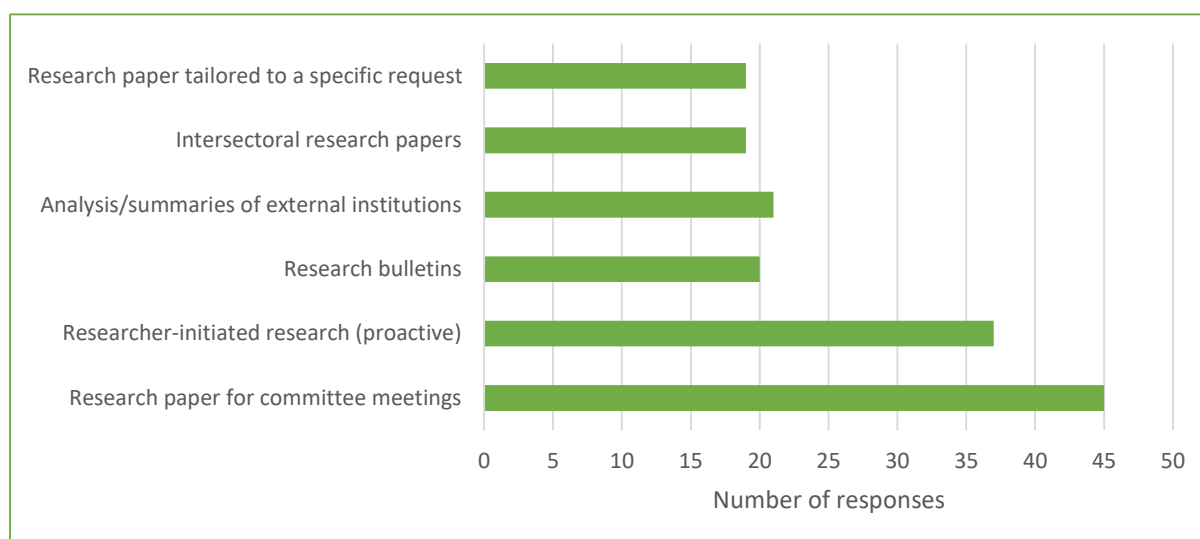


Figure 7: MP views on most valued PRU products

These findings correlate with the survey's finding on which research support services MPs find to be of the most value. A total of 86% of respondents indicated that a research paper for committee meetings, where required, is of the most value to them while 72% emphasised researcher-initiated research (proactive research). Other research products such as bulletins, summaries of external research products, inter-sectoral research papers and research papers based on individual MP requests were all considered to be of value by 19 to 21 of the 52 respondents. The latter indicates that these services are not completely unvalued, but that it is secondary in importance to the PRU's assistance to committee oversight through reactive and proactive research papers.

The survey further tested perceptions around the 'look and feel' of the PRU research products as this has the potential to impact MPs' engagement with such products. A total of 36 respondents (69.2%) indicated that PRU research documents are easily identifiable and look different to other parliamentary documents while 6 respondents (11.5%) felt that PRU documents do not stand out. Ten respondents (19.2%) did not know whether PRU documents are easily identifiable.

The generally positive sentiment around the look of the PRU documents also translated to MP perceptions around the format of PRU documents. A total of 38 respondents (73.1%) indicated that they like the current format of PRU documents while 11 respondents (21.2%) were neutral on the format. Only 3 respondents did not like the current format of the PRU documents. MPs were also asked for reasons why they like or dislike the current format. Some of the key responses are reflected in the table below:



Table 1: Selected MP views on current PRU research papers

Reasons why PRU papers are liked
• Reliable, informative and professional.
• I appreciate the researcher highlighting potential questions.
• Summarises everything, make it easy to understand and directs one to specific focus areas.
• It provide relevant analysis and comparisons with the previous engagement on the relevant topics.
• I am used to the format and find it easy to find information in the document.
• It provide detailed researched focal areas to formulate question.
Reasons why PRU papers are disliked
• Reports can be enhanced by using our indigenous languages.
• I do not know how current papers are submitted to us.
• Submitted to the Committee and not individual members.
• Differ widely from committee to committee. Sometimes regular and well before needed....other times erratic and last minute.
• Often does not go into depth with regards to provincial spending which is important for the NCOP.
• They tend to be a tick box exercise.

MPs' perception of PRU research documents can also be influenced by the delivery of such documents. Qualitative responses in the survey indicated frustration among a small number of MPs that research papers are not submitted in time to prepare well for engagements.

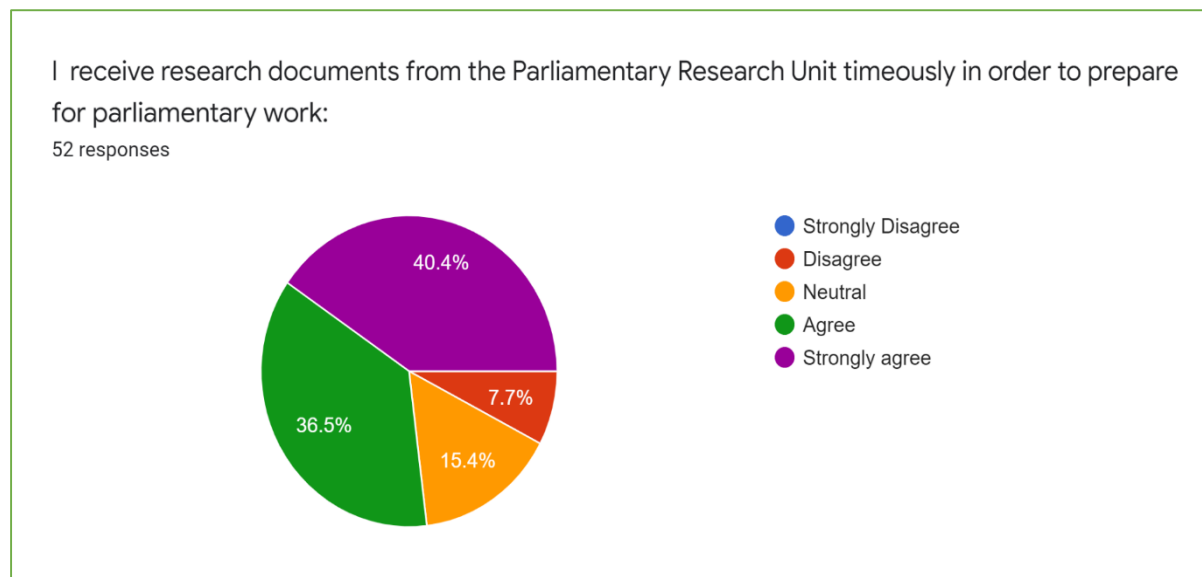


Figure 8: Punctuality of PRU document delivery

The data reveals that 40 respondents (76.9%) feel that PRU documents are received in time for MPs to prepare for parliamentary work, while 8 respondents remained neutral on the matter and four respondents indicated that they do not receive PRU documents in time to do adequate preparation. While this number may be low, the fact that some MPs feel that documents are not submitted on time, combined with some qualitative responses noting late delivery as frustration, may indicate the need for developing means to ensure, where within the control of the PRU, the more timely distribution of research documents.



7. MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT RESEARCH PRACTICES

7.1 Approaching research

The research practices of MPs are important to the PRU as an understanding thereof can contribute to improved service offerings by the Unit. The survey, therefore, sought clarity on who MPs approach when requiring research on a specific matter. Respondents could select several options and the survey reveals that:

- 35 Respondents indicated that they do their own research.
- 38 Respondents indicated that they make use of a political party researcher.
- 12 Respondents indicated that they contact external industry experts (outside Parliament).
- 27 Respondents indicated that they contact the relevant PRU researcher.

The survey finding points to a potential opportunity for the PRU to enhance its connection with MPs as only 50% of respondents thought to contact the PRU when requiring research. The fact that 73% of respondents indicated that they contact a political-party researcher further indicates that a need exists for the PRU to market itself in terms of how these services differ from those of political-party researchers and where PRU services can be of more value to MPs. This marketing should take place across party political lines as the survey reveals no great difference in approach by respondents per political affiliation. 50% of opposition respondents excluded the PRU as an option to approach when they have a research request while 48% of governing party respondents excluded the PRU in their responses.

7.2 Research consumption

After requesting research support on a matter, the survey also sought to test the type of research product MPs prefer. Respondents could choose multiple types of preferred research documents. Ultimately, 38 MPs indicated that they prefer a detailed research document that fully unpacks all key aspects of an upcoming meeting, debate or issue. This was only slightly higher than 34 MPs that preferred a short paper summarising key points and key questions to ask. The fact that many MPs chose both longer detailed papers and shorter summarising papers likely relates to the type of research request. Nonetheless, the survey finding highlights the appetite for both these kinds of research documents among MPs and PRU researchers may have to use their judgement as to the type of document most appropriate for MPs, based on the specific research request. One respondent noted that “there is no hard and fast rule” and that “a deeper analysis of the request” may be useful.

Other research forms did not garner significant preference from MPs. While 16 MPs indicated that they would also be interested in a presentation from the researcher on a specific research topic, only five MPs showed a significant interest in a purely Infographics approach. This finding aligns with the 2019 PRU survey finding where presentation in text was the most preferred format from MPs.¹⁷

¹⁷ Arendse, *et al* (2020) p. 23.

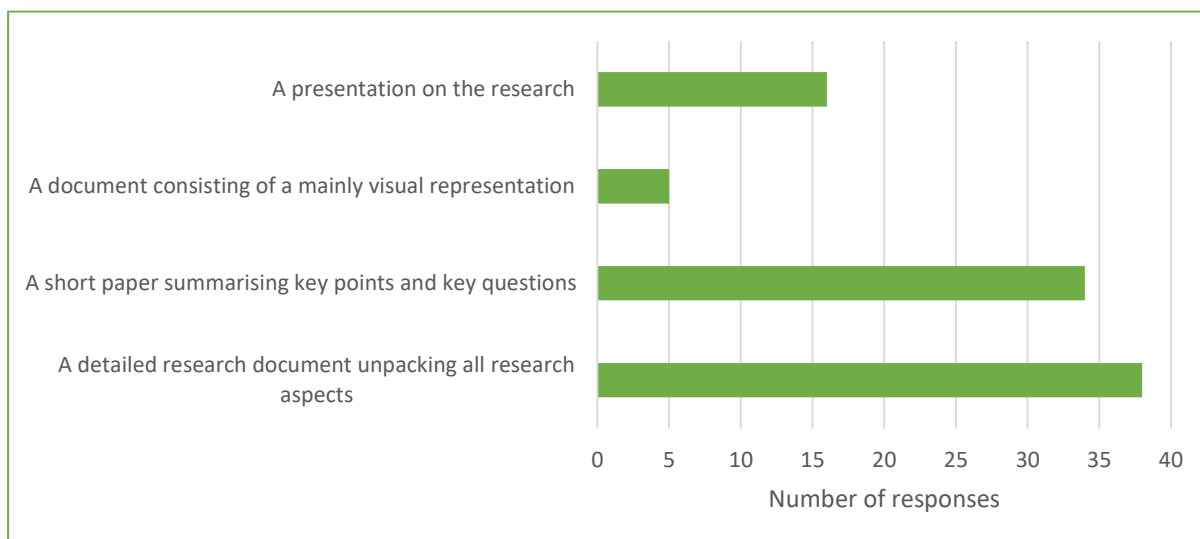


Figure 9: Preferred type of research document

MPs were also asked how they access and read research products as this may impact the PRU's distribution channels and product formulation. The vast majority of respondents (50) indicated that they wish to receive research documents via email. This finding is similar to the 2019 PRU survey findings where 85% of respondents preferred email distribution. Where this (2022) survey's findings differ from the 2019 survey is a clear reduction in the preference for hard copies. In 2019, 65% of respondents preferred hard copies while in 2022 only 8 of 52 respondents (15%) indicated a preference for hard copies.¹⁸ The preference for email distribution was followed by 20 respondents that indicated WhatsApp to be a suitable distribution method. A total of 12 respondents noted the value of a presentation by the researcher while only eight preferred copies or a conversation with the researcher.

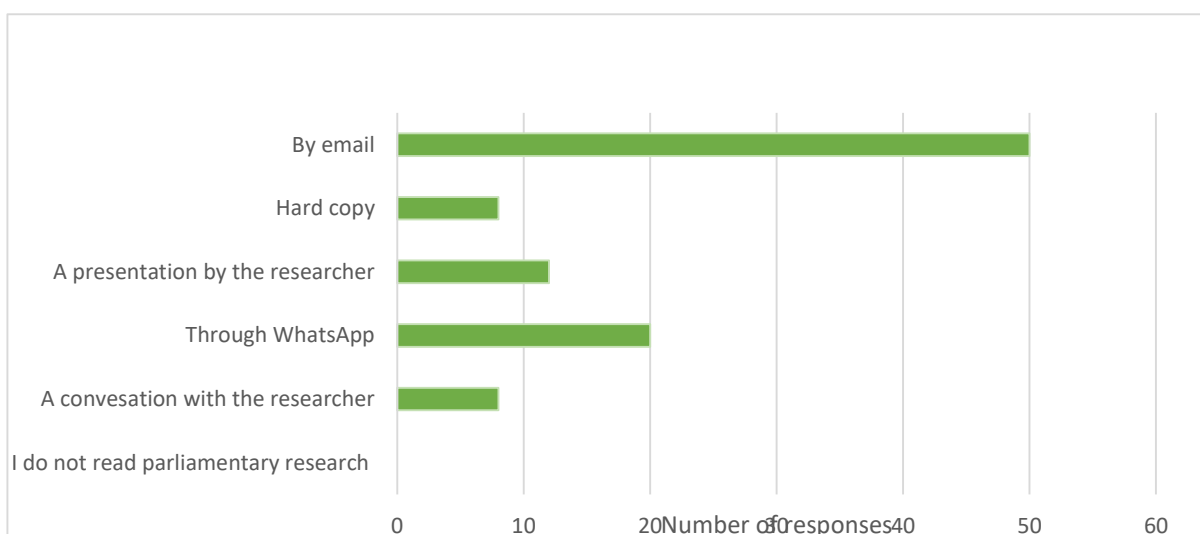


Figure 10: Preferred research distribution

¹⁸ Arendse, *et al* (2020) p. 23.



The preference for email and WhatsApp distribution is also echoed by responses to the question as to which device MPs use to read their research documents. A total of 40 respondents indicated that they use their mobile device (Phone or Tablet) to read research documents while 38 indicated they use their laptops. This trend is specifically evident in younger MPs, with 10 of 12 respondents under the age of 45 indicating that they use their mobile device (phone or Tablet/iPad) to read research documents. This is thus likely to be an important trend to take into account in terms of future research compilation and distribution.

The focus of MPs on electronic means of communication is also strongly visible in the desire of MPs for the PRU to have its own website. A total of 41 of the 52 respondents indicated that they would prefer the PRU to have its own website, or a page as part of the parliamentary website, where they can access all research documents (also refer to Section 9 of this paper for further information on electronic means of communication).

7.3 Engagement with external research

While the PRU provides sector-specific research services to MPs, there are numerous academic and related research institutions outside of Parliament whose research can aid parliamentary work. The survey sought to determine to what extent MPs are connected with such institutions and to what extent they seek research support from avenues outside Parliament. The survey reveals that MPs seldom make use of such services. Only ten respondents indicated that they usually make use of external research experts while 18 indicated that they 'sometimes' use these services. A total of 24 respondents indicated that they never or rarely make use external researchers or research institutions.

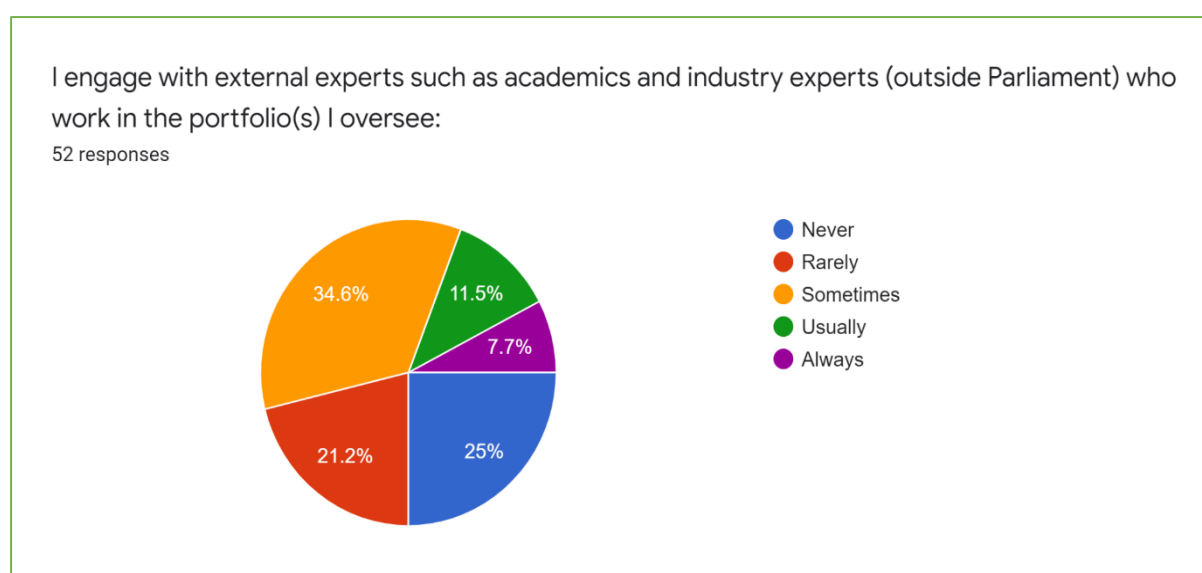


Figure 11: MP Engagement with external research institutions

Engagement with external researchers and entities is particularly divergent in terms of political affiliation. Five of the 24 opposition MPs (20.8%) indicated that they rarely or never engage with external researchers or entities. This figure is higher for governing party MPs, where 18 of the 27 respondents (66.7%) indicated that they rarely or never engage with external researchers or entities. Furthermore, 10 out of 18 (55.6%) Whips, Chairpersons and/or House



Chairpersons do not engage directly with external researchers and/or institutions. As such, an opportunity exist to bridge the divide between external research institutions and MPs, specifically to ensure broader exposure of all MPs, despite political affiliation, to external research.

The survey also verified the view of MPs on whether research from external research institutions is visible in PRU documents. This determinant should be viewed in the context that not all PRU work requires external research to be consulted, especially where research is required solely on departmental plans, strategies and legislation. Nonetheless, the wide array of PRU research documents produced does provide scope for the inclusion of external research in some of these products. Most respondents (17) indicated that they sometimes observe external research included in PRU research documents. A total of 20 respondents usually or always see external research included, while 15 rarely or never see external research included.

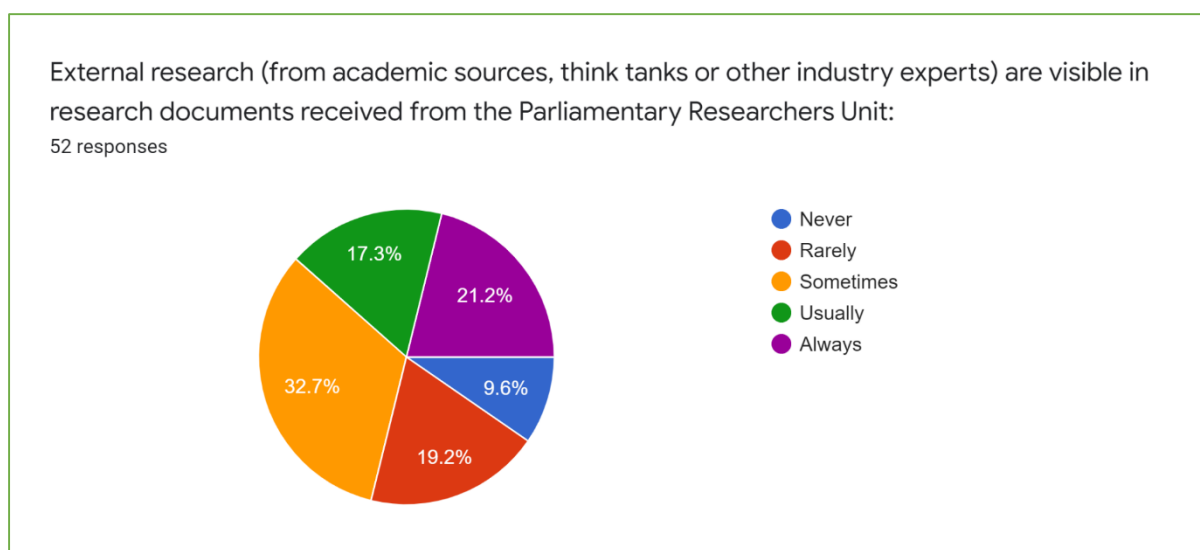


Figure 12: Visibility of external research in PRU documents

The latter observation should prompt the PRU to ensure that all researchers aim at including some level of external research in their research support to MPs where relevant. While a focus on external research is not a primary requirement for MPs, the survey did reveal some degree of interest in external research from MPs. For example, as noted earlier, 12 respondents indicated that they will approach external research institutions or experts when requiring research on a specific matter. A total of 21 respondents also indicated that they attach value to the PRU's analysis and summaries of reports from external research institutions. When asked what is the best way for external research institutions to contact MPs, only three respondents indicated that they do not wish to be contacted by such institutions.

Given the moderate interest in external research from MPs, where does this leave the PRU and what is its role vis-à-vis external research? The survey revealed a potential opportunity for the PRU to serve as a liaison or filter between MPs and external research institutions in two ways. First, the survey revealed that the vast majority of respondents prefer being contacted directly by external research institutions (via email or telephone). In this sense, the PRU can assist the process by building stronger relationships with research institutions and



familiarising them with the work of Parliament in a specific field. This may entice external researchers to perhaps engage directly with MPs. Second, 17 respondents to the survey indicated that they would like external research institutions to submit information to the PRU for inclusion in research documents. This will require strong relations between the PRU and external research organisations and, specifically, strong relationships between individual researchers and external experts.

8. GENERAL COMMENTS FROM MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

The survey concluded with an open-ended question on how the PRU can enhance its services to MPs. Responses varied, but 16 of the respondents, when offered an opportunity to expand on requirements for improved services, indicated that they have nothing to add and are satisfied with the current levels of PRU support. This observation correlates with previous findings in the survey whereby 73.1% of respondents indicated they feel sufficiently supported by the PRU. It further correlates with the HSRC Satisfaction Survey that shows a 69% overall satisfaction rate with the PRU.¹⁹



Figure 13: Summary of MP responses key words for PRU enhanced services

While the overall sentiment around PRU support is positive, some additional matters for PRU consideration can be drawn from responses, including the following observations from MPs:

- The PRU should provide information well in advance and not last-minute.
- Researchers should not limit their research to committee activities but look at international benchmarks and best practices as well as broader or more in-depth research linked to all aspects of a portfolio.

¹⁹ HSRC (2019). p. 39.



- The PRU should consider MP language requirements.
- The PRU should have physical interactions and engagements in the formulation of research work.
- The PRU should provide new MPs with a few key focus areas to start with at the beginning of the term of office.
- The PRU should attend to personal/individual research requests that are not dependent on the chairperson's approval.
- Researchers should be proactive in identifying matters for committees to focus on.
- The PRU should be active in tracking parliamentary resolutions.
- The PRU should consist of a mixture of young and experienced researchers.
- Researchers seem afraid to advise against politicians.
- The PRU should consider annual multi-party cluster research presentations to MPs.
- The PRU plays a role in maintaining institutional memory and can assist MPs in formulating and engaging on the APPs and the Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF).
- The lack of researchers in some committees is a significant inhibitor to MPs.
- The PRU should share newsletters and journal articles relevant to my work.
- The PRU should constantly communicate with MPs.
- There is a great degree of variance between the prominence, accessibility, approachability and technical skill of individual researchers.

9. RELATED RESEARCH FINDINGS

In 2020, the PRU conducted a study to explore the extent to which the PRU could enhance support to the MP in the context of Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) through an e-Parliament.²⁰ A total of 25 questionnaires were completed, of which 20 were completed by Parliamentary Members and 5 by Committee Secretaries. The questionnaires were aimed at gauging the use of technology and the ease with which Members use technology to access information and research papers. Some of the areas covered relate to MPs' preferences in accessing information and research papers and for receiving information in various formats. The 2020 PRU study was concluded prior to the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and much has changed since in the functioning of Parliament. As such, the technological need of MPs have likely increased along with changes to Parliament's functioning.

Some of the findings of the 2020 study indicated that all MPs have access to technology i.e. a Cell phone, Laptop, Email, and iPad/Tablet. The majority of the Members indicated that they accessed research papers via Email or received a hard copy thereof in the Committee Meeting. MPs preferred receiving research papers via email. At least 90% of MPs indicated that they found the research papers useful, which corresponds with the number of Members that indicated in the affirmative that they do receive research papers from Researchers. The majority of the Members indicated that they preferred information to be presented in text form, followed by graphs, tables, illustrations and videos.

The findings of the 2020 study thus concur with those of the current survey, especially as it relates to the Members' perceptions of and access to PRU research output.

²⁰ Arendse et al (2020).



10. SWOT ANALYSIS

Based on the broad findings of the 2022 Survey, a number of strong points, weak points, opportunities and threats (SWOT) can be deduced, as noted in Table 2 below.

Table 2: SWOT analysis based on the Survey

Strong Points	Weak Points
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MPs generally feel supported by PRU • PRU generally perceived as non-partisan • PRU researchers regarded as experts • PRU documents identifiable • PRU document format generally welcomed • Current PRU products largely aligned with MP needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of continuous education on PRU • Lack of understanding of Researcher-Content Advisor role division • PRU not having ownership of its product distribution
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing a PRU Website • Improved relations with external researchers and research institutions • Establishing an autonomous PRU (similar to the Parliamentary Budget Office) • Establishing a Parliamentary Academic Journal • Enhancing the view of the PRU as a non-partisan Unit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of political party researchers and PRU as second option • Some MPs not aware of all services provided by the PRU and therefore feel that the PRU does not support individual MPs • Opposition MPs do not feel fully supported (limited view)



11. RECOMMENDATIONS TO PARLIAMENT

Recommendations to Parliament

Parliament as an institution may consider the following:

1. Improving MP participation in institutional improvement initiatives.

The response rate from MPs to both this survey (52 respondents) and the 2019 HSRC survey (32 respondents) reflects low participation levels. Of specific concern is that the response rate to this survey was low while making use of existing internal distribution methods such as Information Alerts and committee personnel. As such, Parliament should consider instituting means to enhance MP participation in research initiatives aimed at institutional improvement.

2. Assessing the efficiency of Parliament's electronic communications methods with MPs.

The relatively low response rate to this and other surveys, even though multiple electronic communication tools were used, raises questions about the efficiency of the current information distribution channels to MPs. The Info Alerts sent specifically to MPs did not result in a significant increase in participation. In addition, some PRU researchers that distributed the survey to Members noted that email inboxes were full and that emails bounced back.

3. Thorough induction of new MPs on the roles and services of the PRU

Sufficient time should be allocated to the PRU to introduce their service offerings to new MPs during the induction of new MPs at the start of a new parliamentary term. The process should be enhanced at committee level, where the PRU should again be offered an opportunity to outline their service offerings to MPs during the introduction of the individual researcher(s). In addition, the PRU should also be offered an opportunity to present its service offerings to new MPs that join Parliament in the middle of a parliamentary term.

Recommendations to the Knowledge and Information Services (KIS) Division and the PRU

The KIS Division and the PRU may consider the following:

1. Regular education on the PRU and its services

The fact that at least five respondents were not aware of the existence of researchers at Parliament and/or the existence of the PRU in the middle of the 6th Parliament highlights the need for ongoing Member education on, and marketing of the PRU and its services. A once-off introduction to the PRU during Members' induction at the beginning of a parliamentary term is clearly insufficient. Continuous education on the exact services that the PRU offer will also be essential to empower MPs when they have research requirements and will limit confusion of services that the PRU does not offer. This notion was confirmed in the qualitative responses with one MP calling for "annual multi-party cluster research presentations to MPs."



2. Improved education on the non-partisan nature of the PRU

While a large majority of respondents viewed the PRU as politically impartial, there is scope for improvement as some MPs still hold the view that the PRU does not provide effective support to MPs from opposition parties. The PRU should, through its continuous marketing to MPs, impress the fact that it functions as a non-partisan entity in Parliament that supports all MPs regardless of political affiliation. Specific engagement with the parliamentary leaders of opposition parties may be required in this case.

3. Improved role definition

It is evident from the survey that uncertainty exists among MPs as to the exact services provided by the PRU and those offered by Content Advisors. In conjunction with the Committee Section of Parliament (that oversees Content Advisors), a clear role definition should be established for each post and this should be communicated to MPs as part of ongoing education on the roles and functions of the PRU.

4. Committee support as the cornerstone of PRU research support

The survey reveals that research support for committee-related activities, both reactive and proactive, is still the most valued offering from the PRU. While this finding may be impacted with better marketing of *all* PRU services, it highlights the need for the PRU to maintain an elevated level of focus on research support to committees.

5. Enhancing ease of reading of PRU products

In terms of research document preference, MPs showed both an interest in detailed research documents and shorter summarising papers, with the former being preferred slightly more. Depending on the nature of the paper, the PRU could seek to address this dual preference by MPs by including a shorter executive summary in its documents for MPs preferring to just read a short version. In addition, given MP preferences, the PRU should be encouraged to keep research documents text-heavy. Infographics can be used to supplement text in research document, but should not be seen as a replacement for text-based research documents.

6. Minimal adjustments to PRU paper design

Almost 70% of respondents indicated that PRU documents are easily identifiable. It is therefore not necessary for the PRU to redesign its research paper's look and feel. However, given that 30% of respondents were either not sure or did not find the PRU papers to stand out, small improvements should be considered to ensure that PRU papers stand out and can easily be identified by MPs. Identifying and implementing the necessary small improvements may require external assistance through, for example, consultation with Parliament's Design Unit. Further efforts should also be made to ensure uniformity of PRU documents.

7. Taking ownership of PRU papers

A limited number of MPs indicated that PRU documents are not distributed timeously for them to prepare for parliamentary work. While the number is limited and there may be a number of reasons for delayed submissions (such as late submissions of information by Departments), the PRU should investigate why this may occur. In the qualitative



responses, several MPs also requested research documents to be distributed well in advance of parliamentary engagements. As such, the PRU should consider taking ownership of its own research products and distributing this directly to MPs. Not only does this give the PRU control of the distribution process to ensure punctuality, but it may enhance interaction between researchers and MPs. Any potential changes to document distribution should be well communicated with the Committee Section.

8. Highlight the strength of PRU specialisation

When facing a research problem, 73% of MPs indicated that they will make use of a political party researcher as opposed to 53% of MPs that indicated that they will make use of the PRU. Many reasons may exist for this approach, including the political nature of the research required. However, it again raises the need for the PRU to ensure MPs are aware of its non-partisan nature and the PRU should highlight the level of specialisation available in the Unit that may not necessarily be available in the party research domain. This also highlights the need for MPs to be better educated on the fact that the PRU provides services not only to committees, but to individual MPs as well.

9. Optimising PRU document distribution

The two most requested forms of document distribution to MPs are email and WhatsApp. The PRU should ensure that *both* the said distribution channels are optimally used (Also see recommendation 7 on PRU distribution).

10. Ensuring that PRU output is optimised for MP reading

In total, 40 of the 52 respondents indicated that they read PRU documents on their mobile devices. This is higher than the 38 MPs that prefer reading it on their laptop. The PRU should ensure that the layout and design of its papers are of such a nature that it facilitates reading on a mobile device. Consultation with the ICT Division of Parliament or industry experts is advisable in this regard.

11. Establish a PRU website

A total of 41 of the 52 respondents indicated that they would prefer the PRU to have its own website, or a page as part of the parliamentary website, where they can access all research documents. The establishment of a PRU website and the optimal usage thereof to ensure information flows to MPs should be considered a priority for the PRU. The PRU website will also offer an additional distribution channel for broader PRU initiatives that are not necessarily committee specific, such as research bulletins and inter-sectoral research projects.

12. Strengthening relationships with external research organisations

Only 23% of respondents indicated that they contact external experts (outside Parliament) when in need of research on a specific matter. However, 40% of respondents indicated that they find the analysis and summary of external research by the PRU as a valuable service of the Unit. As such, there seems to be a higher demand for external research input than MPs are willing to solicit themselves. The PRU is well placed to play a facilitating and filtering role for external research and relay this to MPs. This role can likely be enhanced through cooperation between the PRU and the Parliamentary Library. In addition, the PRU can consider searching for suitable external research institutions and



formalising relationships with such institutions through research-based Memoranda of Understanding.

While most MPs indicated that they would prefer external research experts to email them directly, 32.7% of respondents also indicated that external researchers and institutions can submit information to the PRU for inclusion in research documents distributed to MPs. Such engagements can be enhanced by the PRU researchers building relationships with external research organisations.

13. Establishing an accredited Parliamentary Academic Journal

Primary research is one of the key outputs of the 6th Parliament Strategy as a means to contribute to deeper scrutiny. There are very few academic journals dedicated to research about parliament, specifically within Africa, and this survey demonstrates that the administration of Parliament can benefit from in-depth study of parliamentary activities. As such, a Parliamentary Academic Journal would encourage researchers to publish primary research in an accredited academic journal and would thus be available to enhance the work of the institution. To ensure high quality research output, efforts should be made to ensure that the proposed Journal can grow into a fully accredited academic journal subject to the relevant quality checks and balances. This will ensure that the journal attracts a wider range of contributions that can ultimately feed into Parliament.

12. POTENTIAL AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study focused specifically on the engagement of MPs with PRU research products and research in general. However, as an outflow of the findings of the study, further potential areas for research emerge, including:

- Studying the potential for an autonomous function of the PRU within an e-Parliament. In the context of the 4IR, an e-Parliament involves the utilisation of Information and Communication. Key benefits include greater public involvement, increased capacity to disseminate information and documents, improved availability of documents and information on the parliamentary websites and more timely delivery of documents and information to Members. Further studies on the position of the PRU within this context and how an e-Parliament can add value to parliamentary research can therefore be beneficial.
- Conducting a similar KAP survey among researchers of the PRU to gauge their view of the research products prepared by the PRU and to determine challenges faced by researchers in maximising their research output and utilisation of their research. The outcome of such a study can be read against the findings of this study to further optimise research production and uptake and to identify any gaps that may exist between MP and researcher expectations.

13. CONCLUSION

Research for a legislature is applied in nature, seeking to draw on a wide range of existing knowledge and then synthesising it in a form that is useful for busy parliamentarians, that may apply it to the understanding and solution of specific problems. The objective of this study was



to better understand how MPs engage with PRU output and research in general. A survey was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of how MPs engage with the output (research products) prepared by the PRU. The sample of 52 respondents was representative as it provided a response rate of 10.61% of the total MPs, i.e. 400 MPs in the NA and 90 in the NCOP. The Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP) approach was employed as the research design as it was appropriate to test the knowledge, attitudes and practices of MPs in relation to the PRU, its products and the utilisation of research in general.

The survey found a broadly positive response from Members towards the PRU and a high level of satisfaction. However, the findings also suggest that there is room for improvement to enhance research uptake. As such, Parliament as an Institution, the KIS Division and the PRU can consider the recommendations made in this report as means to improve the service offerings of the Unit to Parliament, its various committees and individual MPs.



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