Parliamentary Strengthening Programs: Improving Access, Availability and Governance Through a Self-Paced Learning Program

Rick Stapenhurst, The World Bank Institute, fstapenhurst@worldbank.org
Brooke Prater, The World Bank Institute, eprater@worldbank.org

INTRODUCTION

After two attempts to develop a parliamentary staff training course in the late 1990s and early 2000's, the World Bank Institute's (WBI) Parliamentary Strengthening Program requested guidance from its Evaluation Unit and the Quality Enhancement Group (QEG) to revise and help make more effective its course. The resulting team was comprised of pedagogical and subject area experts[1] who examined the program's goals, objectives and delivery options and suggested a framework for web-based training which has subsequently been developed by WBI in collaboration with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), with guidance on program content provided by the CPA's earlier Study Group on Parliamentary Staff Training.

The course, now largely developed and in the pilot phase, comprises a series of thirteen learning modules aimed to support parliaments in fulfilling their role in the governance process. It responds to the unique and evolving needs of parliamentary staff who seek to advance democracy by enhancing good governance, strengthening budget oversight, reducing poverty, improving public participation in the policy process, and reducing corruption, among other goals. As it is publicly available on the internet, the program aims to reach a greater share of the world parliamentary and development communities than those who participate in the more traditional face-to-face and moderated web courses alone.

This paper aims to explain the background, rationale and future of the parliamentary strengthening learning program and to evaluate its effectiveness by considering early versions of the course, the evolution towards the current learning program, the pedagogy of computer-based learning, current course content, recent and planned course deliveries, and proposed mechanisms for long term program assessment.

EARLY VERSIONS OF THE COURSE

The international community recognizes the importance of strong public sector governance and well-developed systems of accountability to achieving and sustaining development results. Since parliaments play such an important role in promoting government accountability – they are the principal 'accountors' to whom governments are accountable – developing the capacity of parliaments to fulfill this function has become an important element to parliamentary support programs of the World Bank, the UNDP and other agencies – other core functions of parliament include legislation and policymaking and giving 'voice' to citizens, through representation.

WBI recognized early on that an important element of parliamentary capacity is the quality of parliamentary staff – they are, after all, the 'corporate memory' of the institution. As a result, it sought to develop a course designed specifically for such staff. The first attempt, a course on Good Governance and Parliamentary Management, was developed in collaboration with the Parliamentary Centre and held in September 1999. Bringing together some 20 senior staff from parliaments in Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia and the Middle East, the course sought to provide an information base on which staff could draw in serving their 'clients' (that is, Members of Parliament). While course evaluations were acceptable, and the Parliamentary Centre went on to

---

[1] Mark Bardini (WBI) facilitated the team, which comprised Mozammal Hoque (World Bank); Poul Engberg-Pedersen (World Bank), Katherine Sheram (WBI), Yongmei Zhou (World Bank), Pat Fn'Piere (USAID) and John Lobsinger (CIDA).

adapt the course for its own use in Africa, the course failed to dovetail with the already established MP staff training workshops and seminars already developed by WBI.

A second attempt was tried in 2003, where WBI and the Parliamentary Centre teamed up with the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration and the Nigerian Centre for Economic Management and Administration. A bold attempt to combine the capacity development of local institutions through course development/delivery, face-to-face and video conference delivery, adaptation of a common course content to country circumstances, and working with local and international partners – the course was generally unsuccessful, due to multiple and conflicting objectives.

EVOLUTION OF THE CURRENT LEARNING PROGRAM

Recognizing the generally unsatisfactory nature of the courses developed through 2003, WBI's Parliamentary Strengthening program sought to have the courses evaluated by an independent source. Utilizing a program called the Quality Enhancement Review (QER), the Parliamentary Strengthening program sought an informal review of the course by an expert panel of peers. The QER aimed to help improve the quality of design of the program through feedback from pedagogical and subject matter experts who provided constructive comments, suggestions and ideas.

The QER Panel encouraged the team to expand the course to a significantly larger number of countries and regions with enhanced local partnerships to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of the learning program. They suggested a regional/international approach to the learning program for which the QER suggested creating a training template including components of a fixed curriculum for legislators and legislative staff. Since there are many prospective countries and participants, a combination of distance learning and face-to-face delivery were suggested. In addition, the QER encouraged the learning program to:

- Expand to staff of all standing committees of the parliament;
- Include case studies, a Facilitator's Guide, and a Participant's Manual;
- Define the learning objectives, the target audience, and expected outcomes;
- Follow a blended learning format including web-based learning that encourages participant interaction;
- Emphasize peer learning that is interactive, participatory, experiential, action-oriented, and directly linked to participants' work program and daily tasks;
- Add web components to enhance the course and transmit course documents and other resources;
- Seek assistance from an instructional designer;
- Coordinate with other branches of WBI to identify partnering countries, ensure alignment with corporate and operational priorities, assess demand by the prospective countries, identify local partners for content development and course delivery, and undertake localization of course materials and content, including translation.

PEDAGOGY OF COMPUTER-BASED LEARNING

The course that resulted from the QER aims to apply a distance learning methodology to strengthen parliamentary capacity regarding oversight, legislation and representation – the core functions of parliament – by modifying the way parliamentary work is performed, thus strengthening the practical application to participants' own job situations.

Following the suggestions of the QER, the new courses included a blended learning methodology including face-to-face training, self-paced learning modules, web-based learning, and videoconference training.

Low & middle income

Internet users (per 100 people)

Scale: Units
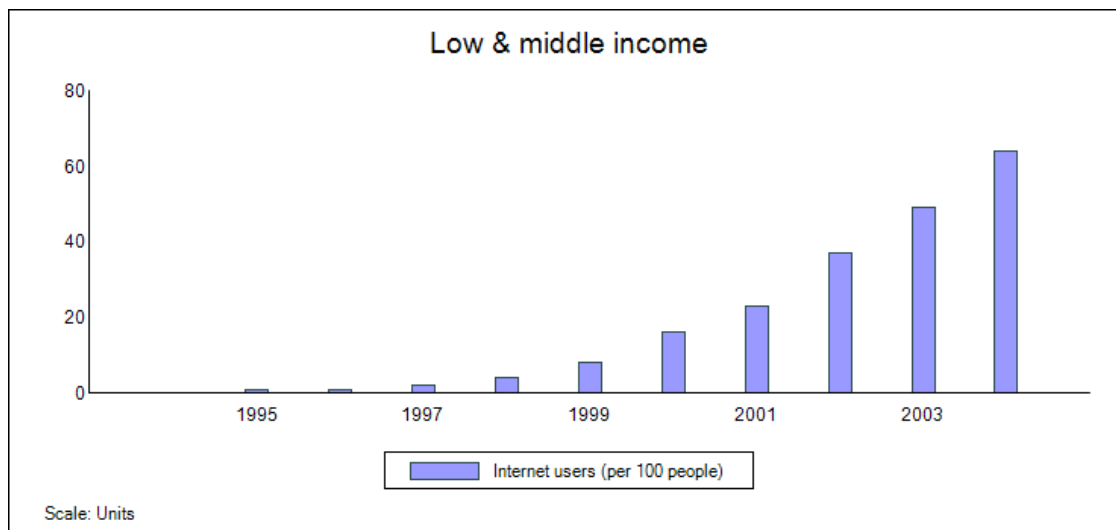
The shift towards e-learning when the program's audience is primarily in the developing world may seem to naïvely limit learners who on the surface appear to have internet access that is inadequate to benefit from an online learning program. However internet access in the developing world is growing rapidly, with already three quarters of the population of low and middle-income countries with regular access by 2004, according to an EdStats query (see the table, above). In considering our particular audience, parliamentary staff, there is also a very clear international move towards an E Parliament. A "Survey of Facilities and Services Available to Commonwealth Parliamentarians" conducted by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in 2003 showed that the majority of governments of the Commonwealth countries surveyed provided access to the internet to parliamentary staff, albeit sometimes through shared facilities. These findings were further substantiated when the Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies in Parliament conducted the first ever World eParliament Report in 2008, which draws on information provided by 105 assemblies of the world to establish a baseline of how parliaments are using, or planning to use, ICT to fulfill their responsibilities and connect to their constituencies. While the report concluded a significant gap between what is possible with ICT and, when inadequate, what has actually been accomplished by parliaments thus far, the Global Centre's survey responses clearly demonstrated that most parliaments are acutely aware of the strategic importance of ICT and have plans to improve their use of technology to support their work.

Making the course available through the internet promises to not only make the course content available to the parliamentary participants, but also to encourage more parliaments to increase the resources they allocate towards internet access for their MPs and staff. As a result, access to these learning programs would be increased. Distance learning also allows our often overworked primary audience of professional parliamentary staff, the flexibility to participate in the learning programs within the confines of their busy schedules privately, should they not be able to join the group learning program locally or internationally. Furthermore, the distance learning methodology allows for a lower cost course, and thus an increase in opportunities for moderated course delivery. Finally, with the material publicly available on the Internet, anyone with an interest in parliamentary strengthening, even for cross-curricular use by those outside of the parliamentary community, can gain access to the material, further increasing the learning program's potential educational impact.

A unique feature in course design was the on-going briefings by the course designers, from both WBI and CPA, to the Commonwealth's Society of Clerks at the Table – a professional group comprising Clerks and Secretaries General from both national and sub-national parliaments throughout the Commonwealth. Feedback received from the Clerks helped ensure that the course content was in line with the needs of parliamentary staff.

HOW WE BLENDED LEARNING

The blended learning modalities that were included in the new learning program, and suggested by the QER, in the revised learning program include:

- Web-based modules. All of the learning modules are available on the website in both HTML and PDF formats so that they may be completed online with the option of participating in moderated and unmoderated online forums, or printed out for those who are limited to the time they may dedicate in front of the computer. The online version also includes course presentations for each module, relevant sources, and background research papers.
- Videoconferences. Through this mode of engagement, subject area experts deliver course content presentations to learners, and facilitate discussions of issues emerging from the online learning modules. These conferences are useful for all aspects of peer learning, including the participatory exploration of ideas and issues.
- Face-to-face instruction. An on-site facilitator is made available before, during, and after the videoconference to summarize the presentation and support interaction among participants. This individual will be taken either from a partner institution or will be a leader from within the organization that is being trained.
- CD-ROM. CD-ROMs may be supplied to participants in cases when internet access is very limited, or to supply participating countries with additional documents, data, course overview, and take-away reference materials, CD-ROMs may be supplied to the participants.

WBI uses the Global Distance Learning Network (GDLN) to provide facilities for videoconferencing, web access, CD-ROMs, and face-to-face work for the various methods of training for the program. These videoconference outlets are used to host videoconference courses to connect parliaments from different countries. As a result, the program organizers and participants can avoid the cost of travel and board for training events, thus making the learning programs more affordable, a greater frequency more feasible, and more accessible to busy parliamentary staff workers in more remote locations. Beginning in August 2007, the course was made available online. Again, by making this series of learning modules publicly available, WBI and CPA together assist a greater share of the world parliamentary community in fulfilling their role in the governance process, while also opening up availability of course material to academic institutions, civil society organizations and others.

A REVIEW OF THE SERIES CONTENT

The modular learning series includes thirteen learning modules for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. The main objectives of these learning modules are to strengthen the capacity of parliaments to oversee the allocation and use of public funds, reduce poverty, improve public participation in the policy process, and reduce corruption, among others.

The current series follows a three-pronged approach in which the most imperative modules fall under the "Parliament in Government Systems" category. These modules include: Orientation for New Staff; Parliament in Governance; Parliamentary Committees; and Parliamentary Democracy. The courses that fall under the "Core Parliamentary Functions" category explain the operational functions of parliament and include: Parliament and the Budget; Parliament and the Media; and Parliamentary Ethics. The "Development" category explains current issues in international development and includes: Parliaments as Peacebuilders; Parliament in Conflict Affected Countries; Curbing Corruption; Parliament and Gender; Human Rights; Introduction to International Organizations; and, soon, an HIV and Parliament module.

Each module includes an introduction to the topic, course content, and relevant research papers and presentations. In addition, the online modules include supplemental learning material to enhance participant engagement, trainers' notes, and instructions for leading the training sessions. Each module is equivalent to 16-40 contact hours of instruction.

RECENT AND PLANNED COURSE DELIVERIES

Between August and October of 2007 WBI and the Parliamentary Centre delivered the first pilot to this new series through the Committees module to 49 participants from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and Sri Lanka. The module describes the various functions and needs of parliamentary committees as well as the administrative and procedural support needed for their effectiveness.

In preparation for the multi-country conference delivered by video conferencing, participants were invited to complete the learning module in a self-paced format, then participated in the moderated online discussion forums to discuss the issues preliminarily, join together as national groups to reflect on their parliamentary committee structure, strengths and weaknesses, and finally join for a moderated videoconference to discuss the content of the units of the module. This cycle was completed three times to complete the learning module. The last international videoconference allowed participants to also reflect and informally assess the training style.

Through active participation and knowledge sharing, participants gained knowledge about the importance and need for creating effective parliamentary committees for a well-functioning parliamentary system. Attending parliamentarians and parliamentary staff appreciated the opportunity to exchange experiences and compare challenges across their countries. Particularly active were the discussions over current trends in accountability standards across the nations. In addition, participants learned, some for the first time, how to operate a course in a self-paced format.

Participants communicated that the module was easy to follow, and would be easy to implement without the videoconferencing component in a completely self-paced format.

The delivery of the first pilot, however, did expose some of the negative realities of holding participants responsible for completing their coursework independently since not all participants took their homework seriously. This work included completing a few units that they had to review on their own prior to the meetings and be prepared to engage in discussions on those units. It was also evident that many participants did not adequately utilize the website that was set up for the course. They were encouraged to visit the site and take part in on-line discussions but only about half did.

Future offerings include an adaptation of the Committees module for delivery by WBI and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs for parliamentary staff in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic and the delivery of the Budget module by WBI and the Centre for Democratic Institutions at Australian National University to parliamentary staff in Oceana. Learning from experience, these course offerings will need to consider methods of incentivizing participants to fully participate in all course components. For those participants who use limited internet as a reason for not fully participating in the course, the learning program might consider requiring participants to prove that they have arranged for access at their parliaments internet work stations as a prerequisite for course participation. Beyond encouraging greater participation, this method may have the added benefit of exposing their administrative offices to the importance of increased internet access for the modern functioning of parliamentary service. Perhaps the program should only award activity certificates to those participants who actively participate in either the videoconference or the online discussion forums. Without such proof of participation, we run the risk of awarding participants for nonparticipation, the old "bums on benches" problem that instructors face throughout the education arena.

PROPOSED MECHANISMS FOR LONG TERM PROGRAM ASSESSMENT
WBI's Evaluation Group (IEG) designs and conducts rigorous empirical evaluations of the learning and capacity development programs implemented at WBI. These evaluations use both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and can include participants' assessments of the quality of learning activities and their relevance, effectiveness, and potential impact (level 1

evaluations), attitudes, knowledge, or skills that participants acquire during these activities (level 2 evaluations), and in subsequent changes in participants' behavior and performance (level 3 evaluations).

In addition to the informal evaluations conducted at the end of the course, the pilot learning program ended with a Level One evaluation by all participants. It is useful to hear participant responses to the Level One survey questions, and the results for this learning program through these evaluations are quite positive. However, it would be beneficial to also conduct Level Two and Level Three Evaluations to measure the course's impact on participant job responsibilities and professional behavior, thus meeting the learning program's long-term goals and purpose.

One question that remains moot: could this course form the basis of an accredited parliamentary staff training program? Such a move could certainly provide the incentive to parliamentary staff to undertake the training and could also help ensure that course content is maintained, updated and revised as necessary to meet participants' needs.