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Uncovering Historical Roots of IFLA Policy Document Indexed in Overton

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ABSTRACT

Background: The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is a global organization in the field of libraries and information sciences that publishes worldwide policies and regulations to guide library service practices, with the policy document itself serving as a practical output for decision-making.
Purpose: The study uncovers the historical roots in the development of IFLA policy documents.
Methods: Data were collected through the Overton database and analyzed using the Reference Publication Year Spectroscopy (RPYS) method, with stages including data collection, filtering, processing, and analysis. References from IFLA policy documents were processed as CSV data adjusted for compatibility and readability in CRExplorer software.
Findings: IFLA policy documents cited references spanning 1992–2019, with a peak year of 2016. The most cited institutions were Libraries Unlimited and IFLA itself, reflecting a combination of internal frameworks and external knowledge development. Geographically, Europe dominates at the continental level, while the United States is the most-cited country at the national level.
Originality/Value: This study offers a novel application of RPYS to trace the intellectual and historical foundations underlying IFLA's policy documents, revealing how internal institutional knowledge and external scholarly sources jointly shape global library policy development.

Keywords: Bibliometrics; International Federation of Library Association and Institution (IFLA); Reference Publication Year Spectroscopy (RPYS); Policy documents

1. INTRODUCTION

International Federation of Library Association and Institution (IFLA) is a global independent organization that develops their pathways in the field of library and information associations, libraries and information services, and librarians and the communities they serve throughout

the world (Saberi & Pazooki, 2020). Founded in 1927, IFLA plays an important role in the development and advocacy of library and information science services (Otike & Barátné Hajdu, 2023; Udatny & Ašperger, 2024). By focusing on education and the development of adaptive guideline and regulation, IFLA a serve as a worldwide standard of service (Otike & Barátné Hajdu, 2023; Tammaro et al., 2020). IFLA's involvement in the development of libraries and information sciences significantly shapes national library policies globally by providing guidelines and standards (Lor, 2024), strategic frameworks (Axonidi et al., 2020), promoting sustainable development (Noh, 2021), supporting national associations (Dike et al., 2020), encouraging global participation (Prado, 2024), and emphasizing impact assessment.

Policy document is a formal practical output for emphasize of decision-making that create by government, international organization, and policy maker institution (D'Este & Robinson-García, 2023; Trübswasser et al., 2022). For some policy document created by international organization had characteristic that usually focus on specific field, IFLA is the global federation in the field of Library and Information Science (Heneghan & Orenstein, 2019; Saberi & Pazooki, 2020). For example, the policy document that produced by IFLA, such as guidelines, universal bibliographic control, strategic initiative, information literacy and copyright, digital library and metadata (Axonidi et al., 2020; Delsey, 2024; Hinchliffe et al., 2022; Saberi & Pazooki, 2020; Zeng et al., 2009). Through the development of policy document address contemporary issues, their formation had influenced by some earlier study/reference that present structure and focus.

In the field of research, reference play a fundamental role. Reference can help to create a structure and focus by linking current research with previous intellectual contributions (Malhotra, 2018; Repiso et al., 2021; Setubal et al., 2022). With this point, reference refers to continuous knowledge, also represent the intellectual and historical foundations of a field (Albertone, 2025; Dai et al., 2021; Nasyrov et al., 2025). The works cited in a document must have a relationship with each other, it can show the traces and historical roots of a research (Repiso et al., 2021). Additionally, historical roots can be pointing out the previous study that been success, also can create the pattern and support the statement of forming an output (Hall-Mathews, 2020).

Interpreting reference as a historical root is very important to study how an idea develops over time. This allows researchers to identify and track seminal works that significantly influence an idea (Zhang & Wang, 2022). By using bibliometric analysis with the Reference Publication Year Spectroscopy (RPYS) method approach, it's possible to figure out the foundational work of a research reference (Marx et al., 2014). Through the RPYS approach, researcher can systematically explore the publication years of cited references in policy documents, uncover the citation patterns that highlight the most impactful historical sources.

Previous research has extensively discussed the practice of citation as an ongoing scientific and knowledge influence by focusing its approach on journal articles (Bornmann et al., 2025; Wray et al., 2024). The application of the Reference Publication Year Spectroscopy method in journals article itself has achieved many successes in fields such as health (Sanabria & Kowalski, 2025), climate change (Marx et al., 2017), ecological economics (Ballandonne, 2019) and more. The RPYS method mostly focuses on journal articles while its application to other documents such as policy documents is still very limited.

This study aims to uncover the intellectual foundations of IFLA policy documents by identifying the influential publications, authors, institutions, and publication years that have shaped their development using the Reference Publication Year Spectroscopy (RPYS) approach. Furthermore, the study seeks to demonstrate the applicability and potential of RPYS for analyzing non-traditional scholarly materials, particularly policy documents. Specifically, the study examines the reference publication years represented in IFLA policy documents, identifies the most frequently cited works based on N_CR values, determines the most cited authors using both straight and complete counting methods, explores the most influential organizations and institutions cited in the references, and analyzes the geographic entities most prominently represented within the intellectual landscape of IFLA policy documents.

2. METHODS

The object of this study was a set of policy documents published by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), which were collected from the Overton database. The search focused on the *Explore Data* and *Policy Document Source* features using the keyword "International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions," thereby retrieving policy documents published by IFLA and indexed in the Overton database. The Overton database was selected as the primary data source because it indexed an extensive collection of global policy documents produced by governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and intergovernmental bodies. Since Overton was specifically developed to track and analyze policy documents, this database was considered highly relevant for understanding the policy impact of organizational publications. Several previous studies had also utilized the Overton database to analyze policy documents, including studies examining the policy impact of scientometric research (Atapour et al., 2024), science-policy (scopus-Overton) linkage (Pinheiro et al., 2021), predatory research in policy (Brandts-Longtin et al., 2022), research influence on policy analysis (Haunschild et al., 2025), policy database (Overton) analysis (Szomszor & Adie, 2022).

A total of 12 IFLA policy documents were retrieved from the Overton database. Subsequently, a manual cross-check was conducted for each document to identify the presence of reference lists. The examination revealed that only five of the 12 policy documents contained reference citations. Since Reference Publication Year Spectroscopy (RPYS) relies on cited references to identify the historical roots and intellectual foundations of a body of literature, the present study focused exclusively on these five documents. The remaining seven documents were excluded because they did not include reference lists, thereby precluding the application of the RPYS method. Data collection from the Overton database was conducted on 14 January 2026 to obtain the cited references contained in the selected policy documents.

Table 1. Policy Document of IFLA, Overton-indexed

No	Policy document title	Institution	Years	References
1	IFLA Toolkit for developing national literacy and reading strategies	IFLA	2019	10
2	IFLA school library guidelines, 2nd revised edition	IFLA	2015	109
3	Development and access to information 2017	IFLA	2019	163
4	Development and access to information 2019	IFLA	2019	46
5	How Libraries Provide Safe Spaces for (All) Youth	IFLA	2018	18

(Source: Overton, 2026)

Following data collection, the references underwent a pre-processing stage that involved the removal of incomplete and duplicate records. The final dataset comprised 346 cited references (Table 1). The dataset was subsequently converted into the Scopus CSV reference format and imported into CRExplorer for RPYS analysis.

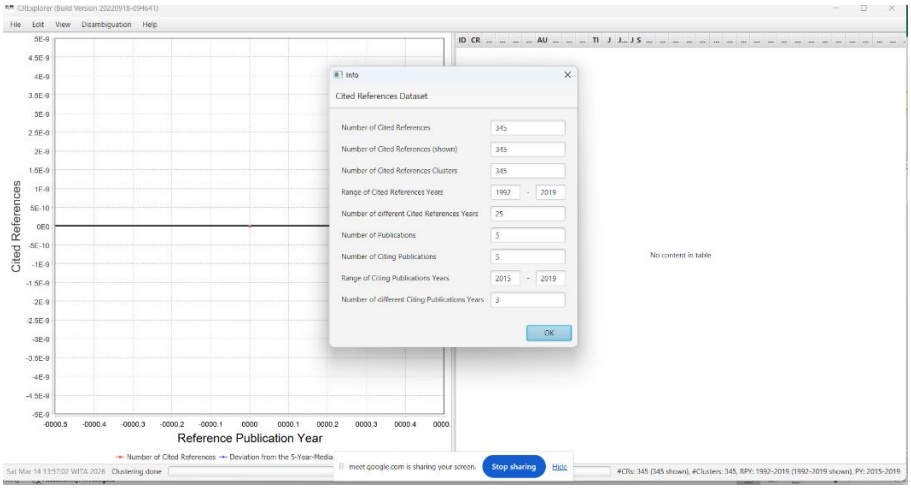


Figure 1. CRExplorer citing references dataset

The seminal publication years and influential references were analyzed using the Reference Publication Year Spectroscopy (RPYS) method implemented in CRExplorer software. CRExplorer was selected because it was specifically designed to perform RPYS analyses and to identify the historical roots and intellectual foundations of a body of literature. After the initial processing in CRExplorer, the dataset was exported for further refinement.

Subsequently, additional data cleaning was conducted using Microsoft Excel to correct errors arising from references with identical titles that had been recorded separately due to differences in capitalization or punctuation, which could not be fully recognized by CRExplorer. References representing the same publication but captured differently by the software were manually merged by combining their respective N_CR values. Following the data-cleaning process, the final dataset comprised 340 cited references extracted from the five selected policy documents. CRExplorer was then used to examine citation frequencies, publication years, and cited references.

To address the research questions, descriptive statistical analyses were performed. Author contribution patterns were examined using the straight count and complete count methods, which were calculated using Microsoft Excel. These approaches were employed to measure the representation of authors in the cited references. Under the straight count approach, only the first author of each reference received one point. In contrast, the complete count approach assigned one point to each author of a reference, regardless of authorship position. The formulas for the straight count and complete count methods are presented below.

Straight Count

$$W(1) = 1$$
$$W(k) = 0, \quad k = 2, \dots, A$$

Complete Count

$$W(k) = 1, \quad k = 1, \dots, A$$

Institutional and geographical distributions of referenced also analysed by Microsoft Excel. The pivot table in the Microsoft Excel tools is used to calculate how often an institution and geographical entities appear in a cited reference of policy document.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the data collection show references from policy documents totalling 346 references, see table 1. The data is then exported to the CRExplorer software which produces 345 data where there is one reference cited in two policy documents, see figure 1. After manual data clearing was carried out, there were six references cited twice until the final number of references became 340 documents.

Analysis results of 340 documents reference data from the IFLA policy document revealed several notable patterns including the frequency of the year of citations, the references that received the most citations, the most cited author based on straight count and complete count, TOP 10 of the most contribution institution, and Geographical entities of reference that cited by IFLA policy document.

Publication Years Identified through RPYS Analysis

Figure 2 presents a spectrogram obtained from the RPYS analysis of the policy document by IFLA is the number of cited reference (N_CR) and their deviation from 5-year-median. The illustration shows the N_CR indicate the cited frequency of publication from each year represent by red line, while the blue line is the deviation from the 5-year-median, calculated by comparing the N_CR of one year with the median N_CR of the two years before, the present, and the two years after it. This allows to identified of citation peaks.

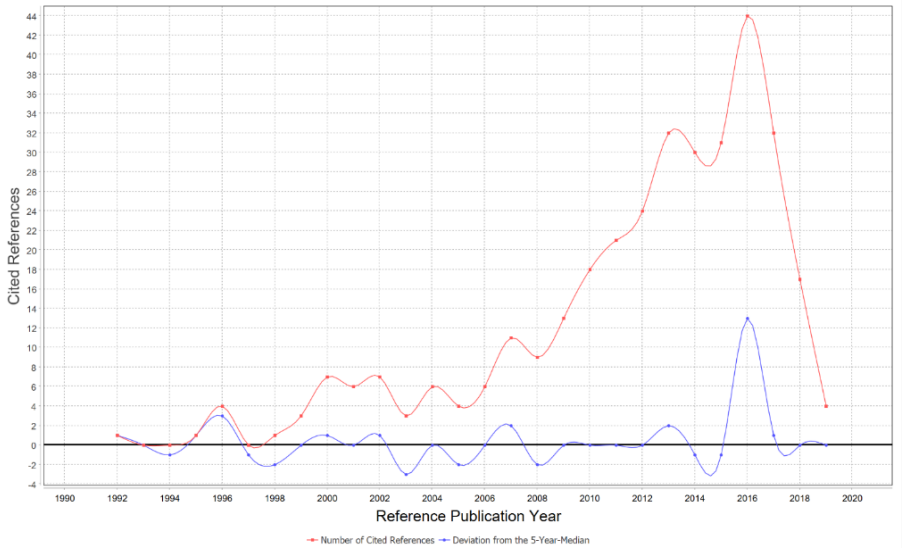


Figure 2. Number of cited reference and 5-year-median deviation spectrogram

According to figure 2, it reveals that generally low-level citations were in the 90's before entering the 2000's era had low-level citations, showing the lowest fluctuation throughout the period. A significant increase began to occur in 2009-2016 showing how relevant the works published in that year were. The peak reference year was in 2016 with a total of 44 citations and a 5-year-median deviation of 13. There were 31 references in 2017 with a 5-year-median deviation is 1.

Most Cited References Based on N_CR

As presented in table 2, the most cited references are seen based on their N_CR value. There are 6 publications that get the most citations with each reference getting 2 citations. These include "Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective" by Manuel Castells et al. (2009), Gigler's work on "informational capabilities (2011)", Heeks' examination of ICT contributions to development "Do Information and Communication Technologies Contribute to Development? Journal of International Development, 22(5), (2010)", Esterhuysen's discussion on economic, social and cultural "Why Focus on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights? Global Information Society Watch 2016, Association for Progressive Communications, Johannesburg, (2016)", Toyama's perspective on technology in development "Technology as Amplifier in International Development, ACM, New York, (2011)", and Martha C. Nussbaum's "Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach (2001)". From several references cited, more than one policy document highlights the importance of capability-based development thinking and ICT-driven social transformation within the policy discourse.

Table 2. Most cited references by IFLA policy document based on N_CR

No	CR	RPY	N_CR
1	Castells, M., Fernandez-Ardevol, M., Qiu, J.L. and Sey, A., Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, (2009)	2009	2
2	Esterhuysen, A., Why Focus on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights? Global Information Society Watch 2016, Association for Progressive Communications, Johannesburg, (2016)	2016	2

3	Gigler, B., Informational Capabilities: The Missing Link for the Impact of ICT on Development, World Bank, Washington, D.C., (2011)	2011	2
4	Heeks, R., Do Information and Communication Technologies Contribute to Development? Journal of International Development, 22(5), (2010)	2010	2
5	Nussbaum, M. C., Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, (2001)	2001	2
6	Toyama, K., Technology as Amplifier in International Development, ACM, New York, (2011)	2011	2
7	Alliance for an Affordable Internet, Affordability Report 2018, Washington, D.C., (2018)	2018	1
8	American Association of Law Librarians, Law Libraries and Access to Justice: A Report of the American Association of Law Libraries Special Committee on Access to Justice, American Association of Law Librarians, (2014)	2014	1
9	Amrein, L.A. and Berliner, C.D., High-Stakes Testing, Uncertainty, and Student Learning, Education Policy Analysis Archives, 10(18), (2002)	2002	1
10	Anderson, M. and Horrigan, J.B., Smartphones Help Those without Broadband Get Online, but Don't Necessarily Bridge the Digital Divide, Fact Tank News in the Numbers, (2016)	2016	1

Source: primary data processed, 2026

The Most Cited Author's Analysis Based on Straight Count and Complete Count

According to figure 3 illustrates the comparison between straight count and complete count in identifying the most cited authors within the analysed references. The results show that C.C. Kuhlthau being the highest position under the complete count approach receiving seven citations, but also had frequency decrease under straight count approach with number of citations is three. Farmer, L. placed the highest cited based straight count while being second placed on complete count approach, both receiving four citations. On the third place there be Castells, M., Garrido, M., Hafkin, N., Limberg, L., and Todd, R.J. Five author being placed on the third place with point of publication 3 based on both complete count and straight count. On the last place, Clark, Gordon, and Todd, R. appear with lower citation frequencies, receiving two citations respectively in both approaches. Overall, for the top 10 most cited author mostly had the same point on straight count and complete count approach except C.C. Kuhlthau.

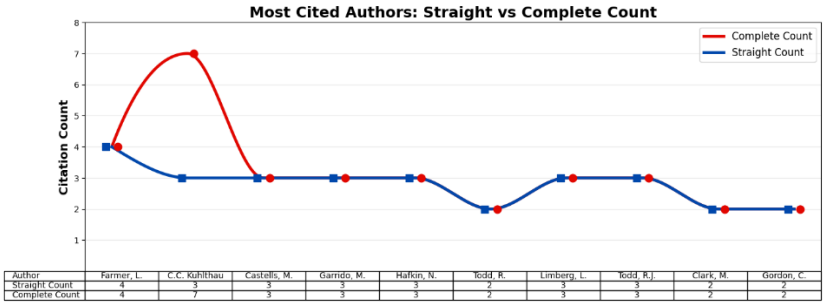


Figure 3. The most cited author by IFLA policy document

Institutional Distribution of Reference Literature

Figure 4 Present the distribution of cited documents based on institutional affiliation. The result indicates that the International Federation of Library Association and Institution (IFLA) and Libraries Unlimited being the most influential institution for IFLA policy document reference, each had the same contribution with 15 cited documents. Followed by the American Library Association being the second place with 11 cited documents. On the third place there also fill by 2 institutions with 9 reference contribution for each institution, they are OECD and United Nation. Oxford University also play the role for give 7 reference contribution for IFLA policy document. While UNESCO, ITU, and University of Washington equally had 6 reference documents, and there are Beyond Access placed in the last position on Top 10 the most cited based on Institution with contributed 5 references. Overall, these findings highlight the dominant role to shape the intellectual foundations of IFLA policy documents in reference to international professional organization and global institution.

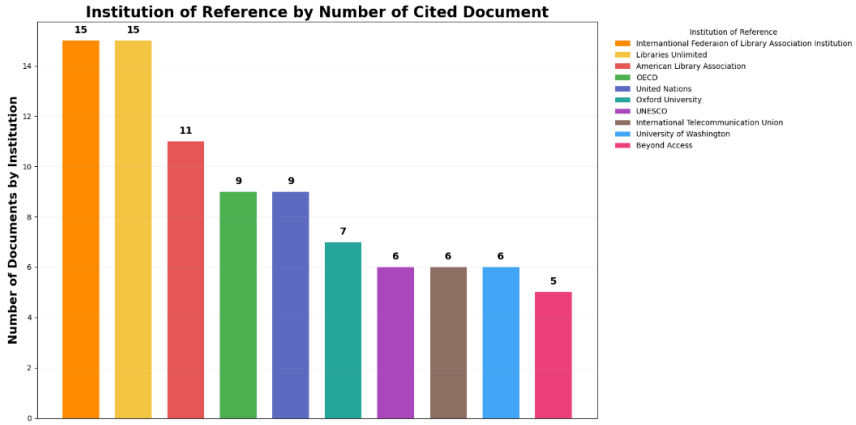


Figure 4. The most relevant institution based on IFLA policy document reference

Geographical Entities of Referenced Literature

According to figure 5, there show the visualization of the geographical distribution of reference cited by IFLA policy document. The illustration used the combination of world chart that present the top 10 countries, bar chart shows the overall country has been cited, and table on the right give the information of total document by the top 10 countries and which city that the reference had been published. It highlights which nations serve as the primary source of knowledge shaping the policy reference.

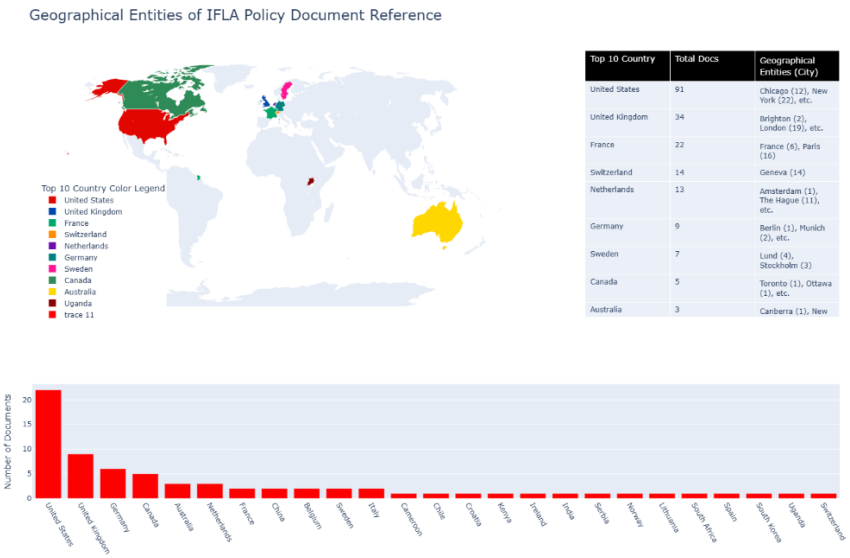


Figure 5. Geographical entities of IFLA policy document reference

As presented on figure 5, the United States became the country with the most dominant contribution, they led by contributing as many as 91 reference documents divided from several cities, including Chicago and New York. The United Kingdom being the second place with 34 cited documents, dominated by the city of London. Other European countries such as France (22), Switzerland (14), and Netherland (13) also have a role with a high contribution in the reference landscape.

Meanwhile, countries including Germany, Sweden, Canada, Australia and Uganda contributed a smaller share of cited documents. Australia and Uganda occupying the last position in the top 10 geographical entities with a total of 3 documents. The bar chart discusses the geographical distribution of references thoroughly and shows a substantial gap between the country with the highest citation and the country with the other countries. Overall, the findings suggest that the geographic foundations underlying the IFLA policy document are primarily from North America and Western Europe.

DISCUSSION

Policy documents published by IFLA and indexed in Overton that have a reference track published in 2015-2019 see table 1. The reference lines of IFLA policy documents that have been analysed using the RPYS method have been known starting from 1992-2019 with the peak reference year in 2016 with a five-year median of 13 see figure 1. Based on the reference of IFLA policy document, in 2016 there were discussed many issues such as digital inclusion, access to information, digital skills, open access and ICT development. This relates with the global momentum regarding the United Nation 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, which emphasizes access to information and digital connectivity as the main drivers of development (Bradley 2016). If we look at the reference that has a high N_CR focusing on capability-based development thinking and ICT-driven social transformation, it can also be concluded that IFLA already has a vision and directly supported the 2030 agenda in 2015. These findings show that the dynamics of the global development program (the UN 2030 agenda in 2015) in the field of Library and Information Science have an impact as an intellectual basis for the publication of IFLA policy documents.

Based on institution, Library Unlimited and International Federation of Library Association and Institution (IFLA) had the highest citation on institution category. IFLA policy document being citing IFLA itself show the organisational continuity, where the previous landscape and guideline are used for inform current policy direction (Lor, 2024). In addition, IFLA policy document also conduct the other institution for their reference to supporting policy development (Saberi & Pazooki, 2020), with this pattern IFLA policy-making used combination study from internal institutional knowledge and external scholarly insights, both contribution used to guarantees that policy are reliable and well-informed (Pilerot & Lindberg, 2011).

Viewed based on the geographical location of the policy document's reference was published, most of them come from the European Continent. The dominance of references from the European continent can be identified from city and country that published the reference also the citation factor based on institutions and organizations, the OECD (French) and Oxford University (U.K) come from the European continent, IFLA itself which is an international organization also came from the Netherlands. One of the institutions that can be highlighted because it has a fairly high number of citations in the development of IFLA's policy documents is the OECD, where the OECD is a key actor in guiding education-related development policy, with affecting the worldwide educational standards (Harmsen & Braband, 2021; Kallo, 2021). European continent also had the strong concentration of globally indexed academic publisher such as Elsevier, and also has an important role in the development of international bibliographic standards such as ISBD.

While the European continent produces the most references when viewed from the continental scale, United State has the largest contribution if it is based on country-scale publication. This can be seen from the many references by IFLA policy document used come from this region. One of the most prolific authors of articles based on the calculation of straight count and complete count in the reference of IFLA policy document is C.C. Kuhlthau or Carol Collier Kuhlthau. She is an academic and researcher from the United States with a background that focuses on libraries and information science as well as her work related to information behaviour and developing the ISP (Information Search Process) model, that suggests her academic insights can guide IFLA's policy direction.

This study successfully demonstrated the expansion of the RPYS method to uncover the historical roots of policy documents. The reference footprints that form the intellectual foundation of the IFLA policy document has reveals. IFLA policy development relies on the organization's internal knowledge, this is considered as a self-citation where it is legitimate to continue and develop research that has been done previously (Ibrahim, 2024). Not only internal knowledge IFLA also combined their reference with external literature. United State being the largest contributor to the IFLA policy document reference trail as well as influential authors such as Carol Colier Kulhthau who is also from New Jersey helped shape IFLA policy direction. A peak quote in 2016 reveals a strong link to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which conceptually views digital transformation and access to information as essential elements of the library's commitment to the sustainable development agenda.

4. CONCLUSION

The main references that form the basis of the IFLA policy document cover from 1992-2019 with 2016 as the peak of the reference, with publication topics related to digital inclusion, access information and ICT-development. Seeing at the institutional level, IFLA and Libraries

Unlimited are the most cited organizations/institutions by highlighting the combination role of internal framework and external development. Geographically, Europe emerged as the dominant continent from the place of reference publications and was divided into many countries, while if viewed from a country level, the United States provided as the country with the most publication documents cited. C.C. Kuhlthau emerged as the most prominent author on the scientific contributions shown the role and insights from academic research contributing in shaping the direction of IFLA policy development.

Applying RPYS to policy documents can highlight the intellectual underpinnings of policy, the findings highlight the balance between the internal institutional knowledge and external insight for policy development. Future research can be expanding the RPYS method to various types of documents, which allows in tracing and observing how knowledge develops.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Alfaidah Esaputri Fastani Parojai: Writing original draft, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, visualization, writing of the original draft, and revision. **Cecep Ibrahim:** Supervision, manuscript proofreading, formal analysis, conceptualization.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

We state that there are no known conflicts of interest linked with this publication, and that there has been no significant financial assistance for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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