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Information and information technology use in undergraduate legal education

In the March edition of this *Reference Column* I wrote of legal research and information literacy. I now feel I have to "lay my cards on the table" I am currently completing a Master of Information Technology (Research) and the genesis for the March column was literature I had been reading for my thesis. Since the March column I have completed the next phase of my research, which was a survey of final year law students regarding their use of information and information technology. I have used the results of this survey as the basis for this column. Whilst I acknowledge that this will probably be of more interest to academic librarians than firm, government or court librarians, I hope you will forgive me my personal bias in this column. I think that the issues surrounding how we, as librarians, educate our users, is of universal significance to law librarians regardless of the type of law library we work in. I would value any thoughts on these issues that you would like to share, either via this column or personally

The rationale for my undertaking this research (quite apart from the *obvious* desire to spend every waking moment away from work attached to a notebook computer typing.....), can be illustrated by the following quotes:

> If there was ever a time when a lawyer could be competent from Bar Admission to retirement, without reading more than selected law reports and the odd statutory update, that time is forever ensconced in history's tomb.[1]

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[1] Gold, N "Competence and continuing legal education" in *Essays on legal education* Toronto: Butterworths, 1982 at p23

Unlike other technological changes, the rapid developments and diffusion of communication and information technologies and the emergence of interactive multimedia applications have the potential to affect all economic sectors, organisational and work structures, public services, cultural and social activities.[2]

> Access to, and critical use of information and information technology is absolutely vital to lifelong learning, and accordingly no graduate – indeed no person – can be judged educated unless he or she is 'information literate'.[3]

The significance of these quotes is no doubt evident to the law librarian community. To me they encapsulate issues that librarians, and the general community to a lesser extent, have mooted for some time. The aim of the research was to *examine* and *describe* the *current* and *potential* use of information and information technology in undergraduate legal education and the implications for law school curricula in Australia. It is hoped that the research might be of significance in developing some general principles for information and information technology use in undergraduate legal education that encourage these as lifelong learning skills and the identification of a set of relevant information and information technology skills for today (it is recognised that these will change over time). The research might also be of significance in making an attempt to develop a conceptual framework/model for the application of information literacy principles to legal research courses in law school curricula.

The literature review examined writings on legal education, the information society, undergraduate higher education, information literacy and legal research training. Several of the articles on legal

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[2] Goldsworthy, *A Global Information Economy: The Way Ahead*, Canberra: Information Industries Taskforce, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1997 at http://www.dist.gov.au/itt/golds/

[3] Candy, P (et al) *Developing Lifelong Learners through Undergraduate Education* Canberra: National Board of Employment, Education and Training: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994 at pxii

research training commented on the need for the development of a conceptual framework for legal research training The research method employed was the survey method, as it seemed most appropriate for gathering data from law students about the *current* use of information and information technology in undergraduate legal education. Final year law students at three Brisbane universities completed a questionnaire that collected data on *demographics* (eg age, sex, whether LLB first degree), *extent* of use of information and information technology (eg how often do you go to the law library, where do you have access to the World Wide Web and how often do you access it, perceptions of legal research training received), *nature* of use of information and information technology (eg ranking of experience in a range of tasks such as using AustLII and case citators, overall ranking of law library and IT skills) and the answers to *a research problem* designed to correlate most appropriate answers with skill level rankings in the nature section of the survey.

The questionnaire results were very interesting and should provide useful insight into the way students use and view law libraries and legal research training. The results have been analysed under the following headings and I will provide just a taste of the results for each heading to provide the general flavour of the findings:

Respondents and their characteristics
- More female final year law students than male
- 80% of respondents were aged between 20 and 25
- Only 53% of respondents said the LLB was their first degree

Extent of use of information and information technology
- 41% of respondents indicated they used the law library almost daily
- 2% said they never went to the law library
- 60% indicated they had WWW access at home
- 43% indicated they used the WWW daily

Nature of legal research training received
- majority of legal research training was received in first year, with approximately 5% of respondents indicating they had received training in each of

the other years of their degree
- 63% of training was delivered by both a librarian and academic, 23% by librarian only

Perceptions of legal research training and skills
- 51% preferred legal research training to occur in a separate first year subject
- 34% supported ongoing legal research training in each year of the law degree
- 30% found lectures a teaching method that assisted learning legal research
- 50% found library exercises an assessment method that assisted learning legal research
- respondents felt that legal research and IT skills were more important to legal practice than their university study

Nature of use of information and information technology
- 46% of respondents indicate they are always successful in using the library catalogue
- 52% are usually successful in using AustLII
- 20% say they have never used legislation annotations
- 51% rate their law library skills as good

The last two chapters of the thesis will be an *Analysis of research problem* and *Legal information literacy*. Correlating the most appropriate answers to the research problem with how students ranked their success at a range of tasks was quite fascinating For example, only 70% of respondents who had indicated that they were always successful in using legislation annotations, always selected legislation annotations as the most appropriate place to determine if legislation had been amended. Whilst there may be a number of ways of explaining these types of results (eg students know to go to the blue books on the reference desk to find information on legislation, but they do not identify them as annotations), the raw data is nonetheless telling.

Legal information literacy will undoubtedly form the genesis for the next Reference column!

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