

A Non-degree Course in Law for Law Librarians¹

Helen Wallace

Law Librarian, The University of Western Australia

DEMAND FOR A COURSE

In 1999 a course was established in Western Australia entitled 'Law for non-lawyers' in response to a demand from members of the Western Australian Division of the Australian Law Librarian's Group (ALLG). They wanted a course that would provide them with an overview of law without long-term commitment; they were not interested in undertaking a degree course.

There was, and still is, a number of tertiary courses already available in Perth at the universities. But they require at least one year of full-time study, or the equivalent part-time, with the attendant demands of assessment; assignments, examinations and so on. At Curtin University, the Library and Information Studies curriculum included a unit for law but it centred on legal research and information resources.

FINDING A SOLUTION

An article by Heather Dawson in *The Law Librarian* caught my eye one day.² It described a course that was being conducted at the University of Westminster in London. The course was called 'Law for librarians' and had been running for ten years. It consisted of 25 weekly sessions from October to May. The original idea was for

a course which would give individuals entering the profession, who may have had no formal background in law, a basic understanding of the English legal system which could be applied to their work³

¹ This is an edited version of a paper that was presented at the 3rd symposium of the Australian Law Librarians' Group, *Law Librarians' Symposium 2000*, Sydney, July 19-21

² Dawson, Heather 1997, 'Lasting the course: a decade of the Law for Librarians evening class', *Law Librarian*, vol. 28, no. 2, June, pp. 72-3.

³ *Ibid*, p. 72

Dawson went on to describe how specialist lecturers were employed to teach the various topics covering all the core areas of the law – torts, contract, criminal law, etc. It sounded like just what we wanted

I contacted Heather for more details about the funding and administration of the course. It is supported by the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL) and the venue is provided by the University of Westminster (formerly the Polytechnic of Central London). Student fees cover the cost of the lecture room, the course director and lecturers' fees, invoicing and administration, and incidentals like tea and coffee.

At the beginning of the article Heather quoted the initial reaction of the Polytechnic:

“A course for law librarians, a worthy idea but we will soon run out of people who want to attend.”⁴

If that was the perception in London with its population of 10 million, how quickly would we ‘run out of people who want to attend’ in Perth with its population of only 1.5 million? Still it was worth a try, even if the course could be conducted once only.

I approached the Dean of the University of Western Australia Law School to enquire whether the School would be interested in establishing a similar course. He declined on the grounds that there is provision at UWA for non-degree students to take subjects that interest them by enrolling as Continuing Education or Audit students. This enables graduates to ‘top up’ their qualifications in areas of special interest by enrolling for individual units that normally form part of a degree course. The Dean suggested that the ALLG members might enroll in ‘Legal Process’ or ‘Introduction to Law’ under these terms. The latter is a unit offered to Economics and Commerce students and has too much bias to Business Law to suit our purposes.

⁴ Ibid, p. 72.

I established a sub-committee of the ALLG (WA) and we drew up a proposal for a course with the aim of approaching various institutions in Perth with a concrete proposal. We decided on a two-part course – basic topics and advanced or specialized topics. Then we identified individuals in the universities and the legal community who might do the lectures.

PART 1	PART 2
1. History of Law	1. Environmental Law
2. The Processes of Law – Parliament	Natural Resources Law
Courts	2. Consumer Law
3. Contract Law	3. Family Law
4. Company Law	4. Indigenous People and the Law
5. Torts Law	5. Employment Law
6. Criminal Law	Industrial Relations Law
7. International Law	6. Intellectual Property Law
	7. Property Law
	8. Wills and Trusts

My next step was to approach UWA Extension who provide courses for the general community. They have four programmes: Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. The Summer programme is particularly popular and includes the long running Summer School. The courses are short, usually of about 6 weeks duration, and cover a vast array of topics from 'Overcoming procrastination' to 'The genius of Mozart', from 'Practical editing' to 'Intuition in healing'. The response of the directors of UWA Extension was very enthusiastic but cautious. They agreed to run the 'Part 1' course in the first instance.

I took on the role of coordinator and contacted potential lecturers, negotiated their topic and arranged their lecture times. The result has been a nice balance of academics and practitioners. The academics took on the theoretical aspects covering the history of law and the processes of Australian law. The practitioners addressed the particular applications of law and drew on their own experiences, which has been invaluable for the students.

The advantage of placing the course under the umbrella of the Extension service is that they undertake all the administrative tasks: booking the lecture room, settling the contract with the lecturers, advertising, enrolling students, paying the lecturers, etc. Best of all, it has increased the number of potential enrolments because the UWA Extension programmes are open to the general community. This is our solution to the problem that was signaled by the Polytechnic of Central London. It is also the reason why we named the course 'Law for non-lawyers' rather than 'Law for librarians'. We quickly absorbed the ready pool of librarians and technicians in the first two courses.⁵ At each course there has been a significant number of students who are not library staff but are from other professions and occupations: government officers, paralegals, teachers, company directors, engineers and a few pursuing personal interests. Because of the response from these people in other occupations we have been able to offer repeats of the course and will continue to do so.

Only one or two have been litigants-in-person. We have tailored the course to give an overview of the theory and principles of law and deliberately avoided any aspect of the 'do-it-yourself' category. The needs of litigants-in-person are quite different to that of library staff.

Many requests have been received from the students for a further course to cover more specialist areas such as those listed in 'Part 2' of our original proposal. A second course is now being established for 2001. It will be offered during the Summer programme and will include Environmental Law, Employment Law, Consumer Law, Family Law, Indigenous Peoples and the Law, and Wills and Estate Law.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research has found no course other than the one offered in London that meets the needs of law library staff. Most courses, apart from community legal education programmes such as those conducted by Redfern Legal Centre, require a tertiary qualification or equivalent as a pre-requisite. Many of the people that are attending

⁵ The course has been offered three times in two years with a total enrolment of approximately 70 students.

the 'Law for non lawyers' course do not have a degree. Nor do they want a course that requires study and assignments. An additional attraction of this course is the moderate fee, especially when compared to HECS and full-fee courses.

In response to feedback received at the Symposium, and also since then, plans are now underway to make the lectures available through the Internet.

Our industry needs leaders

Are you prepared for the challenge?

Aurora
Leadership
Institute
8-13
February
2001

Our worst fear
is not that we are inadequate
Our deepest fear
is that we are powerful
beyond measure
It is our light
not our darkness
that most frightens us
As we let our own light shine
we unconsciously
give other people permission
to do the same
As we are liberated
from our fear
our presence
automatically liberates others
Nelson Mandela

We're redoing something about it
aima.org.au