

Integration of Legal Research Skills in the LLB

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Scenario 1

Student in distress! Assignment question asks him to research the law relating to dangerous dogs at large, including case law and legislation. Student doesn't know where to start.

Scenario 2

Articled clerk in distress! Principal has asked her to track down amendments to the Beekeepers Regulations 1963 that have appeared during the last five years. The clerk doesn't know where to start.

Observation:

Lack of skills and confidence with legal research during the course of the Bachelor of Laws degree translates to lack of skills and confidence in the professional sphere. What can be done?

BACKGROUND

For many years the teaching of legal research skills at the University of Western Australia (UWA) was organized by the Reference Librarians. Classes were delivered only to first year students in the unit Legal Process 130 and it was expected that they would retain these skills for the duration of the course and beyond. This proved to be a vain hope. By the time students reached their final year or moved into articled clerkships they had forgotten the skills they had been taught in first year. What they did remember they had difficulty applying in the professional context and we were getting feedback from law firm librarians that our graduates lacked appropriate skills in this area. The development of electronic information resources escalated the problem.

For several years during the mid-nineties the law libraries of UWA and Murdoch University collaborated with a 'Bridging the Gap' course which was offered to articled clerks soon after their graduation from Law School. This course was superseded by the Articled Clerks Training Programme (ATP) in 1996. However, the legal research component of the ATP was short-lived and the lack of research skills once again became an issue. This coincided with a move by the University to include generic skills in its Teaching and Learning programme. Grants were

offered to departments and teaching staff who developed innovative projects to incorporate generic skills into the curriculum. The Law Library and the Law School set up a Committee of academic staff and law librarians who collaborated to plan a programme to integrate legal research skills into all levels of the Bachelor of Laws degree. This Committee was successful in its application for a grant from the University's Teaching and Learning Committee.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAMME

The Legal Research Skills team included Helen Wallace (Law Librarian), Penny Jones and Sheelagh Johnston (Reference Librarians), Robyn Carroll (Senior Lecturer) and Deborah Ingram (Instructional Designer for the Faculties of Economics & Commerce, Education and Law). Deborah was later replaced by Eileen Thompson.

The first task was to identify competency standards suitable for the legal environment. These were based on the Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education prepared by the Association of College and Research Libraries (a Division of the American Library Association). We applied these standards to the specific legal research skill areas of Citation, Case Law, Legislation and Secondary Sources. We also identified levels of competency: basic, intermediate and advanced.

The next step was to identify the units at each level of the LLB into which the legal research skills could be successfully integrated. Robyn Carroll had been appointed Legal Research Skills Coordinator by the Law School for the purpose of this project and her role was to undertake the initial liaison with academic staff. The units selected were Legal Process, Criminal Law, Equity, Torts, Constitutional Law II, Administrative Law, and Procedure.

Once agreement to participate in the programme was obtained the Reference Librarians liaised directly with the lecturers to prepare curriculum material. This included the allocation of class time; the format of the class (lecture, small group teaching, hands-on sessions in the Law Library Electronic Training Room);

incorporation of legal research skills into student assessment; timing of legal research skill classes with appropriate class assignments; student numbers and attendance records. To make this task easier, we developed checklists to be completed by, or in consultation with, the lecturer.

An important outcome of the programme is to equip the students with lifelong learning skills. The programme for each student will not be completed until they reach their final year. To enable the students to grasp the idea of the incremental nature of the Legal Research Skills programme we provide them with a looseleaf manual which contains documentation and course details. Class handouts and other materials can be inserted as they are received and when the student graduates the manual will be an up-to-date reference that can be used during his/her articulated clerkship.

Various aspects of the programme are being evaluated. The Instructional Designers have had significant input into the design and application of surveys and systems of measurement. Under their guidance we have prepared and administered a number of questionnaires, collected statistics and analysed the results. A complete analysis of the programme cannot be made until the student intake of 2000 (the first year that it was introduced) has graduated in 2003 and 2004.

ELECTRONIC TOOLS

By the end of the first year (2000) we had identified ways to streamline administrative tasks and to diversify the learning experience for the students. One of these is to use WebCT to develop online exercises. The advantages of programmes like WebCT are that students can complete the exercise in their own time; they can do it wherever they have access to the Internet; they can repeat the exercise until they have got 100 per cent accuracy; and the exercise can allow interaction with online legal databases. Assessment is automatically recorded and sent to the lecturer or librarian as required.

Another development currently in hand is online class registration. This will greatly reduce the administrative workload for the reference librarians.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Integrating legal research skills in to the LLB curriculum has required a lot of planning and creativity. Not only did we spend several months prior to the introduction of the programme in February 2000 preparing the syllabus, but the continuing growth and development of electronic legal information resources requires us to update our documentation and class exercises each step of the way. Collaboration with academic staff has been one of the most vital and positive aspects of the programme. The lecturers report an obvious improvement in the quality of research that has gone into student assignments.

Students have responded positively to the timing of skills training within their units and the relevance of session content to their assignments. Some even ask when the next session is scheduled. We have also noticed a significant difference in the sophistication of the queries that students approach us with – a sure sign that they are becoming information literate!