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BIALL/SLS Academic Law Library Survey 2022/23

Abstract: In this article BIALL President **Claire Mazer** reviews the findings of the BIALL/SLS Academic Law Library Survey, which was conducted in 2024 and covered the academic year 2022/23. Claire's article provides some analysis of the responses, while it also outlines some key themes and trends. The author would like to thank Laura Griffiths and Marilyn Clarke at IALS for their work in conducting the survey on behalf of BIALL and SLS (Society of Legal Scholars).
Keywords: surveys; Society of Legal Scholars; BIALL; academic law libraries; universities

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to explore the results of the survey for academic law libraries conducted in 2024 for the academic year of 2022/23. None of the participating institutions have had their identities disclosed. For full access to the survey, please log in to the Member Resources area on the BIALL website. Note the survey is only accessible to members of BIALL.[1]

By way of introduction the web page for the Academic Law Library Survey states that it:

> "Outlines the activities and funding of academic law libraries in the UK and Ireland. It is the only survey of its kind and provides data which academic librarians use to bench-mark their own services and which law course validation bodies note when appraising the provision of institutions seeking to run law courses. It is based on responses to a survey questionnaire undertaken by Academic Services staff at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies on behalf of the British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL)."[2]

BACKGROUND/CONTEXT[3]

The survey has been run since 1996 and it's also been reported in *Legal Information Management* since this time. It is sponsored either by BIALL or by the Society of Legal Scholars (SLS). The 2024 survey was funded by BIALL. Comparisons with the previous survey are provided. Where mentioned, '2018' refers to the 2017/18 survey, but I have aimed to be consistent in distinguishing the surveys alluded to in this article. Previous survey results can be found in the Member Resources area of the BIALL website.

For the 2022/23 survey, institutions were invited to 'opt in' to receiving the survey. This was a new measure deployed to ensure participation. It also guaranteed that there were sufficient responses to the survey from the outset to obtain meaningful results. Seventy-six academic law libraries stated they would be prepared to take part in the survey.

The survey questionnaire was emailed in February 2024 to those 76 institutions in the UK and Ireland who had undertaken to complete the survey. The usual PDF attachment was sent out, as well as, for the first time, a link to an online version of the survey hosted on the IALS website. The online form was a success, allowing for ease of completion and including the ability to save responses as it was being completed. This was especially helpful where survey completion was attempted in stages. The survey was promoted via mailing lists, social media, the BIALL website and also verbal reminders were provided at BIALL meetings including the BIALL Academic Special Interest Group.

The type of institution, shown in the list below, is used for data analysis to detect patterns in law library provision:

- 'Old' universities, incorporated before 1992
- 'New' universities, incorporated in or after 1992
- Institutes of higher education and other institutions

Colleges and research centres where student numbers are small were excluded from the survey. There are instances where the main university library to which they are attached had also been invited to complete the survey, and so in this way some of the smaller colleges' responses were accounted for.

COMMENTS AND ANALYSIS OF SURVEY

The key findings from this particular survey are provided in bold, uppercase type. Where section numbers are indicated this refers to the same within the survey report. Below each key finding I provide some comments and

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analysis. In places I also expand on these to take into account other interesting information in that section of the survey.

THE RESPONSE RATE WAS LOWER AT 65.79%. THE RESPONSE RATE FOR THE LAST SURVEY (2018) WAS 83.04% (SECTION 3)

While the overall response rate to the survey was unfortunately lower, the number of responses from 'old' and 'new' universities and other institutions remains broadly in proportion with 2018 responses. Out of the 76 institutions who opted in, 50 forms were returned. The situation in academic libraries is referred to later, but it seems an appropriate place to state that this survey was conducted in a different landscape to others before it. Notably the 2017/18 and 2022/23 surveys sit either side of Brexit and the Covid pandemic, not to mention other world events which have had bearing on the workplace and society, including how we now work and interact.

OLD UNIVERSITIES WITH RESEARCH DEGREES IN LAW WAS DOWN 1.85% ON THE LAST SURVEY (2018). NEW UNIVERSITIES WERE OFFERING FEWER RESEARCH DEGREES AT 73.91% (83% IN 2018) (SECTION 4)

This is a slight downward trend but is possibly indicative of universities concentrating on maintaining a core number of courses they offer at undergraduate and postgraduate (such as LLM Masters) levels. Overall, comparing data from the previous survey to this one, the number of types of taught course offered by universities has roughly halved. The desire to stay relevant and offer more focussed and attractive courses in a competitive marketplace is at the forefront of law schools' recruitment strategies.

This question (on types of courses offered) is part of section 4, which also looks at student numbers. It is worth noting that some survey respondents were unable to provide student figures. From the data available, it would appear that older established universities were able to sustain their student numbers between surveys, whereas new universities had seen a dramatic fall in the range of student numbers in 2022/23. This contributed to an overall dip in student numbers, something yet to recover post-pandemic.

26% STATED SPACE FOR LAW COLLECTIONS HAD BEEN REDUCED, WITH A FURTHER 12% STATING THAT PLANS WERE IN PLACE TO REDUCE SPACE (SECTION 6)

There are several reasons why this might be the case. The volume of print resources that once occupied law libraries is no longer as great as it was. More reliance is placed on online resources as is the use of personal or networked devices to access them. This in turn allows students, staff and researchers to work differently and be able to access materials conveniently whilst mobile. The way libraries are used has changed over time and they have become more about providing space for users to work with portable devices, either alone or collaboratively. As library funding has become sparser, a move has been made not to duplicate resources. Therefore, print resources have been removed in favour of their electronic counterparts to preclude provision of resources in different formats.

THREE MOST POPULAR LAW DATABASES CONTINUE TO BE WESTLAW UK AT 100% (100% LAST SURVEY), LEXIS+ AT 100% (98% LAST SURVEY), AND HEINONLINE AT 88% (84% LAST SURVEY)

This question asked respondents to reflect on the legal databases they subscribed to at the 'current' time, i.e. April 2024. It is no surprise that these three databases lead the way as they have for some years. Westlaw Edge UK and Lexis+ offer good coverage of legal resources and access to distinct types of them, including cases, legislation, journal articles, and European and international materials. A modest percentage of respondents were planning on new acquisition of resources. A higher percentage were planning to cancel resources primarily for reasons of cost, with 'immoral price hikes' from suppliers being cited. This is certainly something very much on the radar of the BIALL Academic SIG and the Supplier Liaison Group.

JSTOR CONTINUES TO BE THE MOST WIDELY USED GENERAL DATABASE IN LAW LIBRARIES (SECTION 8)

JSTOR was considered along with other general databases such as the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, and criminal justice resources such as Taylor & Francis and Sage. JSTOR, for those unfamiliar, is a database providing access to millions of journal articles, books, and primary sources such as pamphlets and ephemera. It is primarily archival in its nature with a 'moving wall' access model. Considered a staple among universities, it is a rich resource for many subject disciplines, including law. It is especially helpful at providing an interdisciplinary picture of academic research including socio-legal publications.

I would also like to give mention here to the websites providing free legal content including BAILII, EUR-LEX and the government's own legislation web pages. Usage has largely remained consistent, if on the low side, for free websites between surveys, suggesting that the bulk of legal content is drawn from legal databases available on subscription. However, it is clear that the information provided by these websites is valuable for students and

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members of the public. Anything which provides free and good quality legal information is to be applauded.

MEAN EXPENDITURE ON LAW MATERIALS *INCREASED* BY 17.6% ON 2018 ACROSS ALL RESPONDENTS

The overall range of expenditure shrank in the 2022/23 survey compared to the 2017/18 survey. Yet the *average* amount of expenditure on law resources increased in this survey compared with the last. One assumes this is because of less available funding and the need to accommodate higher prices from suppliers. In other words, less monies, generally speaking, to pay for fewer resources with now greater price tags. Expenditure by type of institution was close, with 75% of old universities seeing spending of at least £100,000 drop, yet 25% of the same category of universities noting a small increase in spending over £350,000. A modest uplift in expenditure was noted for 75% of new universities where at least £70,000 had been spent with 25% also recording an increase in spending over £160,000.

Expenditure on monographs (books) did not necessarily provide a comparable set of data. Some institutions reported that they could not identify law expenditure owing to the way the overall budget was divided amongst subject areas. Typically, there had been a decrease in expenditure on monographs, a 20% decrease in old universities and a 50% decrease in new universities.

A similar number of institutions who reported on monograph expenditure were able to report on serials expenditure. Serials here include law journals, statutes, law reports and loose-leaf updates. The average spending on law serials as a percentage of total budget has steadily declined over the last two decades. Possibly this is due to the preference for electronic formats and the move to use space within libraries more flexibly.

ON SPENDING PER STUDENT, MEDIAN SPEND ON LAW MATERIALS PER STUDENT WAS £157.65, A 20.8% DECREASE ON LAST SURVEY. MEAN SPEND PER STUDENT WAS £182.04, A 22.4% DECREASE ON LAST SURVEY. THIS YEAR THE MEAN SPEND PER STUDENT AT OLD UNIVERSITIES (£167.67) WAS LOWER THAN AT NEW UNIVERSITIES (£199.24) (SECTION 11)

In terms of spend on law materials per student, an average of a 20-22% decrease was noted when compared with the previous survey. This is clearly attributable to the financial situation. The spend per student is factored into library calculations, including when comparing with other institutions. The breadth and range of materials available to students, including their currency and relevance, are factors academic teaching staff take into consideration when designing course materials.

THE MEAN CONTRIBUTION FROM LAW SCHOOLS WAS £57,601, UP 46% ON LAST SURVEY (SECTION 12)

Most libraries continue to fund their law resources from general library funds with 100% of responding institutions receiving at least part of their income in this way. The survey also asked whether law schools paid for any specific law materials or online services. Strikingly, the cost of e-book packages such as Oxford Law Trove, and databases such as Westlaw, Lexis and HeinOnline, are increasingly being met by law schools themselves. It is encouraging that they value law resources highly enough to make payments, either wholly or partly, towards subscription costs. So many law databases are embedded into teaching and research that to go without would be to the detriment of law schools' staff, students and researchers.

LIBRARY STAFF WHO SPENT 50% OR MORE OF THEIR TIME ON THE CARE AND SERVICING OF THE LAW COLLECTION/S – NINE (18%) OF RESPONDING INSTITUTIONS HAD NO STAFF WHO MET THIS DEFINITION, (2018: 18 OR 19%). OF THESE, EIGHT (2018: 8) WERE OLD UNIVERSITIES AND ONE (2018: 9) WAS A NEW UNIVERSITY (SECTION 14)

It is fairly standard practice at academic institutions that a librarian, or team of them, will have responsibility for a number of subjects, not just law. This goes some way to explaining why those nine institutions did not meet the definition of spending more than 50% of their time maintaining law collections.

Encouragingly, the survey does report that there were 41 institutions with staff who did spend 50% or more of their time working with the law collection. Of those 41 institutions only two did not have a professional post. 95% of those institutions had at least one designated professional member of staff who spent 50% or more of their time on maintaining law collections. There was little difference in the 2017/18 survey. It is important that professional skills and qualifications continue to be recognised. The percentage of institutions reporting clerical staff who spent 50% or more of their time working on law collections has remained steady compared with data in the previous survey.

Also, on staffing it was encouraging to see that the vast majority of responding institutions used law library staff to provide legal research training: a clear testament to our expertise in this area. The survey asked how many timetabled contact hours[4] of legal research skills

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instruction a student would receive from library staff during their courses. For the most part, this had remained stable between surveys where library staff had provided contact hours to undergraduates, postgraduates and doctoral researchers.

The survey queried whether library staff were involved with additional activities. There was no change from the last survey in the order of popularity and activities included:

- Creating online subject and research guides
- Providing content for law library web pages, social media and web portals/gateways
- Writing articles for publication

CONCLUSION: CURRENT SITUATION AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES

I reiterate my thanks to Laura Griffiths and Marilyn Clarke, for their continued email dialogue with me and BIALL colleagues over the course of 2024, and for liaising with academic institutions and creating a new form to collect responses for this survey and further, for their dedication and attention to collating the data and providing the report.

I cannot conclude this article without mention of the situation currently facing students and many academic institutions.[5] Budget constraints for both students and academic institutions caused by historic and chronic underfunding, the price ticket on the cost of living, the increase in tuition fees, rises in building maintenance costs and the lack of attraction to study in the UK for international students (who can no longer bring partners or families while studying) have caused a drop in student numbers, university mergers, building closures and reductions in staff headcount. My thoughts and solidarity go out to those colleagues working in the academic sector who are affected by these issues.

This survey feels more relevant and useful than ever to highlight figures, detect trends and patterns affecting academic libraries and their users. Thanks must also go to those library and information professionals who took the time to complete this survey. Your input and contributions are invaluable. Indeed, we should celebrate the collegiate nature and goodwill within academic libraries and that of their staff in what currently feels like a very challenging sector.

Endnotes

[1] Marilyn Clarke and Laura Griffiths (SLS), 'BIALL/SLS Academic Law Library Survey 2022/23' (*BIALL*, 20 January 2025) <https://biall.org.uk/membership-resources/> (NB: member log in required) Accessed 30 January 2025.

[2] BIALL, 'Annual Academic Law Library Survey' (*BIALL*, 20 January 2025) <https://biall.org.uk/membership-resources/academic-law-library-survey/> (NB: member log in required) Accessed 31 January 2025.

[3] Readers should note there are repeated references to BIALL web pages and the survey itself as referenced at n1 and n2 throughout this article.

[4] Contact hours were defined as direct timetabled teaching or tutorial guidance.

[5] See: Hayley Clarke, 'My university course made me who I am - now it's being cut' (*BBC News*, 8 February 2025) <www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz9e2xw9p8po> Accessed 8 February 2025.

Biography

Claire Mazer is Academic Liaison Librarian at Brunel University of London, where she has worked since 2002. She is also the President of BIALL, her term ending in June of this year.

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