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Guiding Away from Google: Finding Ways to Engage Law Students with Academic Databases

Abstract: **Catherine Parkin** is a librarian at Leeds Beckett University (LBU), while **Aarti Sehgal** is a librarian at the University of Sheffield (TUoS). These institutions both have around 1200 students registered on a taught Law course. Against the background of an increased need to prove academic libraries are obtaining 'value for money' from subscription resources, alongside the desire for law students to be effective and critical users of information, this article explores database engagement activities carried out at the authors' institutions. It considers the impact of teaching and online tutorials created to engage students with resources, and discusses tools used to check resource usage.
Keywords: legal education; user education; online databases; academic law libraries

STUDENTS' LACK OF ENGAGEMENT WITH ACADEMIC DATABASES

At Leeds Beckett University (LBU), a team of academic librarians looks after the Law School, alongside three other schools in the institution. Academic librarians are responsible for teaching information literacy and are part of a wider team that includes Academic Skills Tutors, who provide support for other academic skills like writing and argument construction.

At University of Sheffield (TUoS), there is a team of three Liaison Librarians for the Faculty of Social Sciences and a total of nine Liaison Librarians as part of the Faculty Engagement Team. Research and Critical Thinking workshops are delivered by the Library Learning and Teaching Services team.

A key role of academic librarians is to make students aware of the range of resources they have access to, and to teach them how to evaluate which are best for their specific information needs. There is also a pressure for librarians to prove our resources are good value for money, by showing high usage figures. Experiences at LBU and TUoS have shown that law students are often not using all the resources, or not using them very much. Students' success in studying law is dependent upon them being able to identify evidence and to construct clear, coherent arguments. There is a tendency for first-year law students to stick to familiar sources such as Google, rather than using databases such as Lexis+ or Westlaw, and even if they do get to grips with those, they often never move on to other databases such as HeinOnline. Lecturers tell us that students' first assignments often rely heavily on materials provided in lecture notes and contain lots of references to websites. Research by Dunning & Kruger[1] and Bates[2] shows that even students with low levels of competence tend to overestimate their skill level. This could mean students think what they are using is adequate and view themselves as good legal researchers, even if this is not the case.

Traditionally, databases such as Lexis+ and Westlaw have provided universities with student associates, who work within the institution to promote the databases. LBU currently does not have any associates, though TUoS had a Lexis+ associate in 2023/24 and this is discussed later in this article. (Anecdotally, these student associates are becoming rarer). Both institutions use subject guides containing links to key resources and librarian contact details. Viewing statistics for library law guides are high compared to guides for other subjects – but librarians at both institutions wanted to see what other things could be done to engage students with library resources. The ability to find appropriate academic and legal sources is a major learning curve for students, but crucial. Learning how to find and use these resources not only helps students find what they need to complete assignments, it also helps prepare them for professional life.

SETTING THE SCENE EARLY SO STUDENTS KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT

Students often come to universities with little knowledge of information sources other than Google. But information seeking and critical thinking behaviours which were

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adequate at school cease to be so at this level of study, and it is our role as librarians to see students early on in their studies and to make it clear why they should be using a wide range of high-quality sources.

There are various strategies to be used when persuading students to engage with subscription databases. One of these is to encourage the use of library services in general – if students feel comfortable approaching librarians, they are presumably more likely to ask if they can't find what they need and can then be guided to appropriate sources. In 2020 LBU created an induction module, located on our virtual learning environment (VLE) (using Blackboard), called 'Study Smart'. The units introduce new students to the library and take them through the basics of studying at university, with formative quizzes after each unit. Study Smart has been embedded each year into the core first-year module 'English legal system, methods and skills' and signposted by lecturers as being an important building block to more law specific materials within the module. Study Smart is not compulsory, but after liaising with lecturers about the importance of pushing students to do this module, in 2023/24 30% of first-year law students had completed the tutorial by the end of semester two. This is quite high, when compared to the 16% of other first-year undergraduates across all subjects who completed the module. It shows the importance of lecturers signposting students to our supporting materials. Ideally all students would complete Study Smart and there is possibly research to be done on comparing database use of those who complete Study Smart against those who have not.

At TUoS, focus is on library induction and introducing students to legal databases for taught students. The library-led sessions 'Legal research and writing skills' and 'Skills for criminologists' are delivered within the curriculum. During these sessions, demonstrations are given to the students on how to discover and use legal databases.

WORKING CLOSELY WITH ACADEMIC STAFF TO EMBED RESOURCES IN THEIR MODULES

Students are more likely to engage with resources if they are explicitly linked to their module, and authors such as Allen have discussed this notion of embeddedness.[3] Good communication with module leaders can enable librarians to boost resource usage by mentioning them at the right time, in the right context. At LBU, 'English legal system' is a core first-year module introducing students to the legal system of England and Wales, which helps students get familiar with finding, reading and making sense of legal materials. It also gives them a practical introduction to online research skills. In 2020, librarians and lecturers co-created the 'Introduction to Legal Skills Tutorial', to be used within this module. The tutorial can be used asynchronously, outside the classroom, on any device, to ensure students start their course with practical experience of using Westlaw and Lexis+.

Microsoft Sway was used to structure the content (a mixture of database providers' videos and bespoke video and written content). MS Forms were included for students to complete to show their understanding of using legal databases and finding legal sources. Links to the Sways were embedded in the VLE and clearly signposted to students. Only 93 of the 323 students (29%) enrolled on the module completed the quiz in 2023/4. Ideally 100% of students would complete this, and there is research to be done on comparing database use of those who complete this tutorial against those who do not. Advantages of the tutorial include the ability to gain access to basic analytics such as view count and average read length (a useful gauge for engagement) and the ability to see the most common answers to questions, via the responses tab in Forms. This highlights whether there are questions that a lot of students are having difficulty with, and lecturers can then spend more time explaining these areas within seminars.

At TUoS, librarians worked closely with lecturers to embed resources in their modules. Librarians were timetabled within the LLM and BA Criminology course in the first two weeks. The learning outcomes of these librarian-led sessions were for students to learn how to use StarPlus (the TUoS library catalogue and online discovery tool) and a variety of legal databases. After an initial 'introduction to the library' session, students were signposted to online resources and tutorials. They were then asked to work through the legal information skills workbook, which was uploaded on the VLE (Blackboard). This gives them hands-on practice in finding books, journals, abbreviations, legislation and case law. A week later, a follow up 'troubleshooting' session was scheduled by the lecturer to check if students encountered any issues. Workbook answers were shared via the VLE so that the students could check their answers. The whole process prompted students to reflect on their learning, consider which databases they perceived to be most useful, and to be made aware of any gaps in their knowledge of legal skills.

OBTAINING STUDENT FEEDBACK

Academic librarians can receive feedback directly during individual appointments or teaching sessions, during student forums where student representatives attend, or via surveys. Appleton, in his review of student engagement, provides examples of techniques used by institutions and speaks about the importance of academic libraries being more "service oriented and responsive to students as customers".[4]

At the end of November 2023 librarians and lecturers at LBU co-delivered a live session to all first-year law students. This session built on the initial induction events in September and online materials students had already had access to. It highlighted the importance of using library resources, using them effectively within assignments, and of referencing correctly. Padlet was used to encourage

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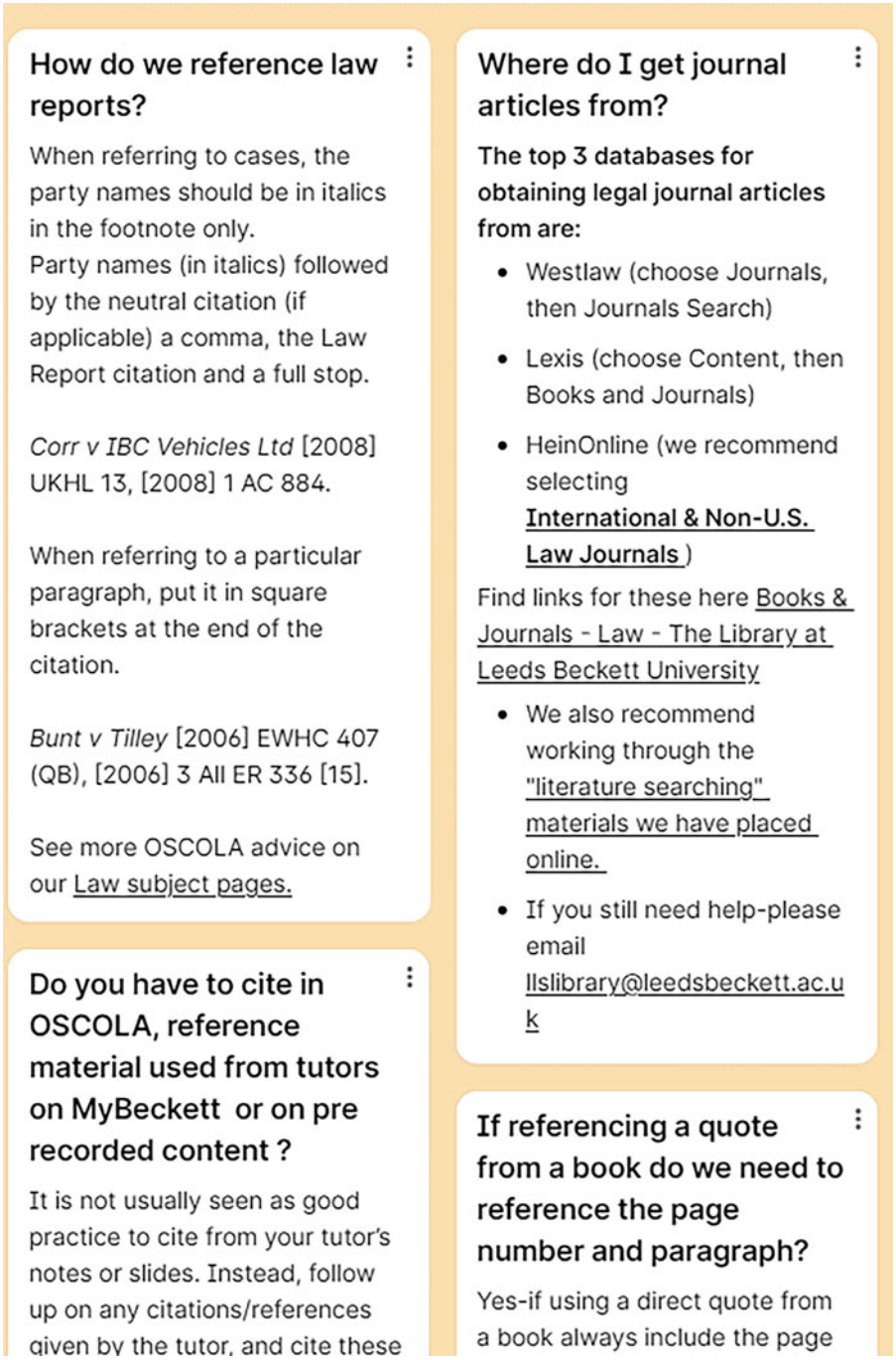


Figure 1: Excerpt from the Padlet used in November 2023

them to ask questions (Figure 1), which allowed librarians to find gaps in students' knowledge (which could be addressed either immediately or later). It became obvious that not all students were confident in finding information at this stage, or in how to cite it correctly.

Student fora are invaluable in allowing us to hear what students think. As a result of attending law student representative meetings in 2024, LBU librarians discovered that students deem adding extra slides and QR codes to the end of lecture presentations to be the best way of getting messages out to them. They do not often read emails (something librarians often use to advertise resources) and only skim read the law newsletter. As a result of this, LBU librarians now ask lecturers to incorporate slides into the end of their lectures, advertising library workshops and resources.

At TUoS, librarians engage with law students in several ways. They contribute to the student newsletter, sent via email, and attend Student Voices Committees. Librarians also use X (formerly Twitter) to communicate with staff and students. TUoS had a Lexis+ student associate in 2023/24. The associate provided individual and

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group sessions, which students booked via a Google Form or QR code. They also sometimes attended student staff committees and organised quizzes to enhance student engagement with Lexis+.

At TUoS a survey was sent to all law students in semester two, asking them about their knowledge and use of the library subscription legal resources. To give an example of two questions from the survey, the first asked, "Have you used the Library Guide for Law and Criminology for discovering subject specific databases (legal resources) or referencing guidance?" Around 26% of respondents said they had not used or were not aware of the Library Guide.

Another question asked, "Do you know using legal resources beyond StarPlus and Google, helps you build your legal and employability skills?" Again, around 26% of respondents said that they did not know this. These answers were surprising due to it being semester two (and therefore there had been time for students to have been introduced to the library guides and to have used a variety of resources). Due to the survey only receiving 19 responses, the results cannot be viewed as statistically significant, but there are some indications that TUoS could do more work in making students aware of the legal resources and the potential for them to enhance employability.

PROMOTING THE EMPLOYABILITY ANGLE

As Mawson has stated, student employability and skills are a key priority for the HE sector.[5] Tate and Glazzard state that the experience of universities has changed "into preparing workers of the future who can enter the neoliberal market as oven-ready graduates who can make a contribution to the global economy".[6] By making students aware that the ability to expertly use legal databases can make them more attractive to future employers, librarians can potentially increase usage of library resources.

Law librarians have long recognised that the business information resources we provide have a value for students in developing an awareness of the business environment in which a law firm operates. In 2023/24 the LLB employability module at LBU was moved from the second year to the first year of the course. There has also been more co-delivery between the librarians and the lecturers. In this semester two module, students are introduced to a wider range of academic sources and prompted to consider how they could use business and news resources to enhance their commercial awareness. A few specific databases were chosen, such as FT.com, to plant the seed that there are other resources available.

This module is another opportunity for students to obtain certification for Westlaw and Lexis+. At LBU, database trainers provide online sessions on certification and then students are encouraged, during the length of the module, to complete certification in their own time. In 2022/23 157 LBU students completed Lexis+ certification and 74 students completed Westlaw certification. In 2023/24 (at the time of writing, the end of July) 163 students completed Lexis+ certification and 82 students completed Westlaw certification. Small increases, but increases nonetheless.

TUoS encourages the development of 12 Sheffield 'Graduate Attributes', which are those skills and characteristics that the university have agreed are likely to be particularly beneficial to academic success, personal development and future employability.[7] Staff from the careers service and the library co-deliver a workshop drawing on these attributes (notably academic skills and research and critical thinking), which is focused on commercial awareness and how it can help students in their next steps after university. Students are advised of the



Figure 2: Sheffield Graduate Attributes at TUoS

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advantages of knowing more about the structure, history and business of a company before they write an application or attend an interview. The interactive session introduces students to tools and resources they can use to demonstrate and improve their own skills in commercial awareness.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA AND ANALYSING USAGE STATISTICS

Academic librarians often obtain and analyse usage statistics for resources, which increasingly feed into decisions on whether to renew subscriptions. Low usage is often used as one of the criteria on which we make cancellation decisions. High usage can demonstrate value for money to the wider university. LBU resource team colleagues obtained usage data using OpenAthens, EZproxy and Elasticsearch. This data was used to check database usage by first-year law students.

The data was also used as a way of evaluating the impact of specific interventions by librarians to guide students away from Google. Librarians checked whether use of Lexis+ and Westlaw, and other subscription databases such as HeinOnline, increased after the follow up live lecture on library resources, given on 28 November 2023. They then examined data showing usage of databases throughout November 2023. This showed that Westlaw and Lexis+ were being used 'healthily' by first-year law students, with 730 and 474 hits respectively for the whole month. Database usage dropped slightly w/c 20 November but increased again in the final week of the month, with HeinOnline having the highest usage of the year (14 hits that week, rather than the usual three per week in November) after the live session. However, it is difficult to prove any link between usage and this specific training session held on 28 November. But librarians can now use the data to check to see whether spikes in usage correlate to any other activities within the library and delve deeper into the data.

At TUoS, librarians obtain their statistics for how often certain databases are viewed via the links on the library guide. Between April 2023 and April 2024, Westlaw had 856 views, Lexis+ had 639 views and Oxford Law Trove had 326 views. These align somewhat with usage data obtained at LBU, with Westlaw being more popular and Law Trove not as well used. Usage statistics are only one piece of the puzzle, and it is often hard to directly compare usage data between resources. Resources are used in different ways, for example, students might only need to access Law Trove once to view a specific title, which is quite easy to find, whereas they might need to use Lexis+ or Westlaw multiple times to conduct several searches and might be looking for several cases. Usage data is a hot topic at the moment for law librarians, and there has been discussion about how standardisation of the data provided by legal database providers would be extremely beneficial.[8]

SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

We have looked at reasons why students might not engage with library resources and examined some activities carried out to enhance and monitor engagement. We have also shown the importance of seeking the student voice. Time will tell whether the use of QR codes promoting library resources within lectures at LBU will result in higher usage of these resources. The survey conducted by librarians at TUoS was a starting point to obtain information about how law students are using library resources. It showed that there are still many students who are unfamiliar with law databases in semester two, at which point the ideal would be for every student to use these regularly. LBU librarians continue to see student fora as a vital way to find out what students think about our resources, and TUoS librarians will continue to engage with students via different channels such as the newsletter and social media.

It is clear that working closely with lecturers is very important. As a result of conversations held between librarians and lecturers at LBU, certification for Westlaw and Lexis will form part of the assessment of the employability module from 2024/5. Also, all first-year law students will now be automatically enrolled onto the Study Smart module (instead of relying on them self-enrolling). It has been discussed how the employability aspect is important in engaging students. So far, the measurable impact of library input into the employability module upon resource usage has been minimal or hard to discern. However, there are opportunities to work with lecturers in the coming year, to evaluate the new format of the employability module and discuss how librarians can harness this as a vehicle for improving resource usage.

We have discussed the increasing importance of obtaining usage statistics for all library resources. It is clear from the statistics obtained in 2023/24 that students prefer a few resources over others and that teaching sessions do possibly encourage students to use library sources. More work needs to be done on measuring usage of all resources and ensuring that database suppliers are providing us with accurate, up to date usage data. If further research were to show that students are using the databases and *still* not using them in their assignments, our focus would shift from promotion of resources onto spending more time teaching students how to incorporate case law, legislation and journal articles into their written work.

It would be remiss not to mention generative AI tools at all, although this did not come into the scope of our discussion here. Law students are undoubtedly using such tools, making it even more important that they are aware of the high-quality academic sources they should be using in their work.

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Endnotes

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Biographies

Catherine Parkin has 25 years' experience of working in academic libraries. She's looked after the Law subject area for 15 years and enjoys helping library users feel confident in finding their own information. She has presented at BIALL in 2016, when she delivered the lightning talk 'The Leeds Beckett Library Libguide on Employability and Skills Development: Moving into New Territories of Support' and in 2024, with the presentation which forms the basis of this article. She has written several journal articles, including one published in *Reference Services Review,* based on her MSc dissertation, which examined library anxiety.

Aarti Sehgal has 23 years' experience of working in the corporate and HE sector. She has worked in the University of Sheffield Library for the last 13 years in various roles. She is a Liaison Librarian for Law, Management, Economics, Education, Politics & International Relations and Sheffield Methods Institute. At present, she is undertaking a secondment as a University Teacher in Librarianship and Information Management at the Information School at TUoS.

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