



Legal Research Education Report 2019

Abstract

Legal research is the practice of finding and analysing case law, legislation and other sources to support legal decision-making. It is what enables practitioners to increase their knowledge of current law – key legislative provisions and case precedents - to answer clients' questions or prepare for litigation in the courts. Research is a hugely important aspect of the legal profession and is taught as part of the legal education curriculum.

Over 90,000 students in the UK are enrolled in law degrees, and the annual number of training contracts in England and Wales fluctuates between 5,000 - 6,000 - around 100 of these at each of the Magic Circle firms. Competition for these desirable contracts is at an all-time high, and it is therefore important that law students are well equipped with both practical and theoretical knowledge for conducting legal research when graduating university.

This report investigates how the teaching of legal research is viewed by staff and students. It explores student confidence when conducting legal research and investigates whether some law students are being left at a disadvantage due to a skills gap created by the variation in teaching. We present an objective view of the current state of legal research teaching across the UK and other parts of the world.

This report looks at the differences between the three teaching approaches used in the UK - *Frontloaded*, *Online* and *Integrated* - and the preference for learning from law students. The report also highlights:

- Students are potentially at a disadvantage compared to their peers when applying for training contracts
- The majority of students are only moderately confident in conducting legal research
- The scale of the support that students require from law librarians, academic staff and peers

These findings along with many more are detailed in this report. We conclude with a discussion on the standardisation of teaching and resources supporting legal research to tackle the problems identified.

“It was widely recognised that legal research skills were not sufficiently acquired by the end of the academic stage.”

Legal Education Training Review, 2013

About vLex

vLex is a legal technology company, who have developed the vLex platform to empower law professionals by combining one of the most extensive collections of legal information in the world with the most advanced AI-powered tools.

With hundreds of thousands of clients of all sizes, millions of users around the world rely on vLex to address their legal research and technology needs. vLex is one of the leading companies developing legal technology on a global scale, with a team of over 130 lawyers, engineers, and editorial experts.

vLex apply the power of an AI cloud-based data hub to ingest, enrich, classify and deliver insights contained in over 100 million legal documents from 2,000+ multilingual and multi-legal system global sources, to bring you the most up-to-date and relevant legal data and content.

About Justis, a vLex company

Justis has been at the forefront of the digital dissemination of legal information for over 33 years. JustisOne, its flagship legal research platform is trusted by law firms, barristers, government departments and academic institutions around the world. Justis' unique software brings new ways to search, interpret and analyse legal information.

The original Justis platform was launched in 1999 and was widely viewed as the most intuitive online library at the time. In 2005 Justis launched JustCite, an index of invaluable legal material, case relationships and citations metadata. In 2016, we combined these innovative products to create JustisOne.

In its history, Justis has redefined case law research by bringing into focus every case from every superior court, and that has only been possible by the addition of intelligent analytic tools which make research faster and more precise. This combination, plus the addition of components such as the largest legal information taxonomy which has been developed by Justis, have changed the way common law practitioners access case law.

About the researchers

David Hand joined Justis, a vLex company, in 2017, and is the principal Marketing & Communications Analyst, having studied Social & Cultural Studies, Research Methods, and been a doctoral candidate at the University of Nottingham. In his role at Justis, David has been involved with a range of activities, including the Justis International Law & Technology Writing Competition.

Dr Matthew Terrell is the Head of Marketing for Justis, a vLex company, and the driver behind the Justis International Law & Technology Writing Competition. Prior to joining Justis, Matthew was the Co-founder and Chief Communications Officer for Call for Participants, an online research service used by over 600 universities around the world. Matthew was also a Start-up Mentor for both Virgin Start-up's, and Jisc's Summer of Student Innovation.

Why did we conduct this research?

With over 180 of the top law schools around the world subscribing to Justis, we believe that legal research skills are incredibly important for students to develop. This belief has been the driving force for the Justis Academy event in 2017, and for the JustisOne Law Student Legal Research Handbook in 2018. Justis has also run the International Law and Technology Writing Competition for students for the past three years, and have hosted Student Legal Design Sprints to help support students' legal education. It is with this background that Justis was motivated to explore how legal research is taught.

“There was a lot of information that I learned that I was not taught at university.”

Law Student, University of London following the Justis Academy 2017

90,000+

Law students studying in the UK

“It was widely recognised that legal research skills were not sufficiently acquired by the end of the academic stage.”

Legal Education Training Review, 2013

67

Research participants from 67 universities

13

Research participants from 13 jurisdictions

50%

Over 50% of undergraduate and vocational postgraduate students are only moderately confident in conducting legal research

30%

Less than 30% of undergraduate students are highly confident in conducting legal research

200+

Over 200 research participants, including both staff and students

3

Models of legal research teaching

46%

46.6% of students would prefer an integrated model of legal research teaching

45%

45% of staff members report they are frequently approached for help with legal research questions

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Why is legal research important?

Legal research is an essential part of legal practice and the associated skills which are used to locate case law, legislation and other legal information that may be relevant to a matter are important to master. It is the foundation of the arguments put forward in court, it is what enables firms to advise their clients, and it is how practitioners stay up-to-date with important developments in their area of expertise.

With it playing such an important part in practice, legal research skills are critical for law students to learn and develop during the course of their legal education, from undergraduate study through to professional training courses, and beyond this as they begin training contracts. As trainee solicitors are often given the task of conducting legal research the way that students are taught is key, in order to establish a solid foundation that they can build on throughout their studies and into their career as they gain greater understanding and experience.

Legal research education

An undergraduate degree is the first stage of the longer process of legal education and the foundations that students acquire during this degree are a vital part of developing into the legal professional they aspire to be.

This includes learning the law across numerous practice areas, how to conduct legal research, exploring precedents and establishing which cases remain 'good law', and how to use legal research platforms to do this. As they progress throughout their studies these skills will be refined, and during the vocational training courses, such as the LPC or BPTC, they are trained to conduct more efficient legal research, to prepare them for the work they will be expected to do as they begin their legal careers.

During this time, law students will learn about the fundamentals of legal research, with information about citations, authorities and the anatomy of law reports. Additionally, they will be taught how to use legal research platforms, specifically how to search and locate different documents, how different databases house different materials and where to source official and authoritative legal information.

This gives students a foundation to be able to begin finding materials using legal research platforms, which they can develop further through experience, supported by more advanced or specific teaching to encourage them to continue enhancing their skills.

Existing research on legal education

In 2013, the Legal Education Training Review (LETR), a joint project by the Solicitors Regulation Authority, the Bar Standards Board and ILEX Professional Standards was published. This was a thorough, evidence-based review of legal education and training in England and Wales. This wide-ranging review covered many areas of legal education, including legal research:

“There was a strong consensus that legal research skills are important and need to be addressed at different stages in the training process. Despite the small proportion of time spent, on average, doing legal research in practice, it is still considered a crucial skill, especially for trainee solicitors. It was widely recognised that legal research skills were not sufficiently acquired by the end of the academic stage.”

[Legal Education Training Review, 2013](#)

One of the reasons which contributes to this conclusion is that there is evidence that the development of legal research skills is variable across the LLB, GDL and LPC stages, particularly where students might not have the chance to produce long essays or projects in the field. As a result of this, it can be difficult for firms and chambers to be confident in the level of skill that the graduates they hire have acquired.

The LETR suggested that this could be addressed at a number of stages throughout a law student's education, which they termed as Legal Services Education and Training (LSET); the most clearly identified way to address this was through incorporating more legal research teaching into the curriculum and testing the outcomes of this more explicitly. Assessment was seen to be an important component in this as it would demonstrate that outcomes have been met, and offers some indication of quality and consistency, which would aid in measuring the specific skills that students were acquiring.

Additionally, the LETR recommended that "LSET schemes should include appropriate learning outcomes in respect of professional ethics, legal research, and the demonstration of a range of written and oral communication skills". This recommends that the teaching and learning of legal research should have defined learning outcomes, rather than being seen solely as a skill which is a means to achieve other goals related to assessment on modules.

In addressing legal research during a Qualifying Law Degree specifically, they saw that "there may be a case for any revised Joint Statement to recommend the allocation of discrete credit/hours to skills development, particularly in respect of legal research and writing." Here, in referencing the Qualifying Law Degree, meaning the LPC or BPTC, they suggest that any revised Joint Statement from the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the General Council of the Bar could specifically mandate that a minimum number of hours of legal research teaching must take place, or that allocating module credits, and so assessment, to legal research teaching could be required. While this did not come to pass, the consideration it was given highlights the importance of legal research teaching in the broader legal curriculum.

"Students are expected to have received training in legal research."

Joint Statement on the academic stage of training, issued by the Law Society and the General Council of the Bar

It should be noted that while the LETR was the first systematic review of legal research teaching, it was not the first piece of research which identified issues with the way legal research is taught, and students abilities in conducting legal research. In a 2006 paper, Professor Ian Gallagher, Professor of Law and Director of Legal Communication and Research at Syracuse University School of Law, discussed the internet research skills that students of the Google generation have, but that conducting legal research requires a different skillset:

"Contemporary legal research is a complicated subject. The mechanics of conducting that research are difficult enough for law students who might not be as sophisticated in research technique as they might imagine, but the context within which legal research is conducted in law practice means that efficient, effective research skills are expected by legal employers."

Professor Ian Gallacher, "Forty-two: A Hitchhiker's Guide To Teaching Legal Research To The Google Generation" (2006). College of Law Faculty - Scholarship. 71.

This paper was written as law schools were adapting to the transition from teaching how to conduct paper-based legal research to teaching how to conduct research using the online platforms that are common today. However, as Professor Gallagher discusses "there is nothing new in the notion that law students have trouble understanding how to conduct efficient legal research, nor are some of the reasons for this phenomenon hard to understand", citing work from 1977 and 1989. This highlights that the issues students have in conducting legal research are not exclusive to the internet age and that universities have been attempting to find effective strategies to teach legal research for at least 40 years.

Methodology

This research project adopted a four-stage approach, which allowed each stage to be designed to further interrogate the findings of prior stages. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods was chosen to cross-examine the topic as broadly as possible to determine the scale of any variability in legal research teaching and the impact this has on students, while allowing for us to explore the provision of this teaching in more detail.

Initially, we started with three exploratory semi-structured focus groups to understand more about legal research education, containing law students from London universities. The students were from different levels of education and were able to draw on their experience of undergraduate degrees and vocational education inside and outside of the UK. During these focus groups, it was notable that students at similar stages in their academic life had very different experiences of learning legal research.

To expand on this, we sent out a survey to staff and students in law schools to understand the wider experiences of both teaching and learning legal research. We received 186 full responses, from 67 universities across 13 jurisdictions including the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States of America and Australia. This included 154 students and 32 members of staff, comprised of 16 library staff, 13 academic staff, 1 library assistant, and 2 respondents who did not disclose their job role. While many of the responses were from the UK, this survey highlighted that experiences were similar in other regions.

Following this, we explored the provision of legal research teaching and the decision-making process around it in greater depth by conducting telephone and in-person interviews with 16 law librarians and members of academic staff from a range of UK universities. These interviews were conducted with a combination of survey respondents, those who had previously written or presented on legal research teaching, and those based at UK universities.

Finally, we conducted a second survey with law students to validate our findings from the first survey and interviews, where we received 58 full responses from law students at 24 universities across 9 jurisdictions.

Research impact

With over 90,000 students enrolled to study law in the UK, and an annual intake of approximately 20,000, the number of students competing for training contracts is at an all-time high. As the yearly number of training contracts in England and Wales fluctuates between 5,000 - 6,000, and Magic Circle firms only offering around 100 training contracts each, competition for these desirable contracts is more fierce than ever. It is possible that law students who are not fully equipped to conduct legal research will be at a disadvantage compared to other law students. However, with a wide range of external factors involved in teaching, this research set out to understand how legal research teaching is conducted at different universities, what is considered good teaching practice for legal research education, and whether the current level of teaching results in students feeling prepared to conduct legal research.

The impact of this research extends beyond improving the current legal research education experience for some students at select universities, and could have a wider impact on law firms too.

When reflecting on his time with a Magic Circle law firm, Richard Mabey, co-founder and CEO of Juro, discussed how “they have a very comprehensive onboarding process”. As part of this, year-on-year:

“They brought in an independent consultant to conduct intensive teaching on how legal research should be conducted in practice.”

Richard Mabey, co-founder and CEO of Juro

While this is a single anecdotal example, it suggests that law firms may have concerns with the consistency of the legal research skills that their trainees learn and develop while in the legal education system.

Is there a problem?

Identifying problems with legal research teaching

In the introduction and background, we identified that issues with the teaching of legal research, and students' capability to conduct research effectively, have been recognised over a number of years, culminating in the findings of the LETR. In this section, we look at the results of our research to identify the different issues that exist among students. In summary:

- Students and staff are not in agreement as to which resources are available to them
- The majority of students only have a moderate level of confidence in conducting legal research
- Students often need additional support from staff to conduct legal research tasks

Awareness of access to legal research tools

- Neither staff nor students appear to be aware of the full range of legal research platforms available to them
- Knowing how to use multiple legal research platforms is important in a legal career

In our first survey, students and staff were asked to identify which legal research platforms their institution subscribes to, and where staff and students from the same university responded their answers were compared as shown in Table 1 overleaf.

From looking at the findings presented in this table, it is apparent that students and staff are not fully in agreement as to which services their institution subscribes to. From the five universities included, we can see discrepancies not only between the staff and students but also between members of staff and between individual students.

For example, the student respondents from the University of Technology indicated their university does not subscribe to JustisOne, while a staff member has stated they do have a subscription. Similarly, for the University of Technology, while the majority of students stated they have access to LexisNexis, the staff respondent did not believe they have access to this platform. Differences between staff knowledge of legal research platform subscriptions can be seen in the responses from City University and Hugh Wooding Law School. In both instances, staff members are in agreement that they have access to some services (Westlaw and LexisNexis), yet with other services there is disagreement.

Finally, differences between students are seen where there is a variation in the number of responses within the same university. For example, at Hugh Wooding Law School, all student respondents appear to be in agreement with their access to Westlaw and LexisNexis, while fewer students indicated an awareness of access to other services.

These findings are of significant importance because it is vital that students are aware of, and can develop the skills to use, a range of legal research platforms. This is vital where content is exclusive to a specific platform, as when they begin their careers they will be required to use the resources that a firm has available. This was strongly emphasised by Holger Aman, formerly Holborn Library Manager at BPP:

“They need to know how to use them because content is exclusive sometimes. For example, if you want Halsbury’s, it doesn’t matter how you feel about Lexis, you’ve got to use it. Some of the smaller firms might only have one of the platforms, so it doesn’t matter what you like you need to be able to use what they have or what the partner wants. Also, sometimes, platforms go down and you can’t just tell a client that ‘Lexis went down and I don’t know how to do it on Westlaw’”

Holger Aman, former Holborn Library Manager, BPP

TABLE 1: A comparison of the awareness staff and students have of the legal research platforms their institution subscribes to

In this table, scores range from 1, representing 100% of respondents from that university, to 0 which represents 0% of respondents

Respondent	University/College	Westlaw	LexisNexis	HeinOnline	JustisOne	JustCite	Justis
Student	City University	1	1	0.7	0.3	0.1	0.3
Staff	City University	1	1	1	1	0.5	0.5
Student	Hugh Wooding Law School	1	1	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.5
Staff	Hugh Wooding Law School	1	1	0	1	1	0.5
Student	Harvard University	1	1	1	0	0	0
Staff	Harvard University	1	1	1	1	1	0
Student	University of Exeter	1	1	1	0	0	0
Staff	University of Exeter	1	1	1	1	0	0
Student	University of Technology	1	0.7	0	0	0	0
Staff	University of Technology	1	0	0	1	0	0

Student confidence in conducting legal research

- The majority of students are only moderately confident in conducting legal research
- One factor in this lack of confidence is not knowing when legal research is complete
- Staff associate students using services such as Google or Wikipedia rather than legal research platforms with a lack of confidence
- Students may be confident in conducting research with a specific platform, but not with others

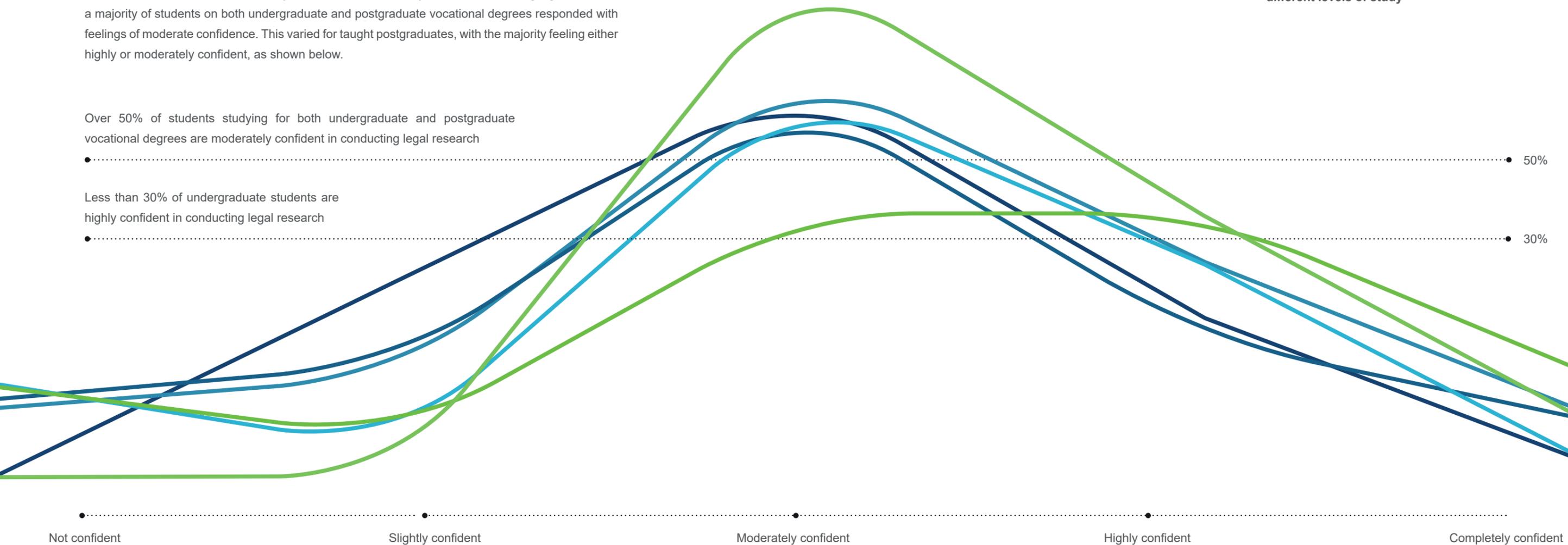
When students were asked in a survey about how confident they felt when conducting legal research, a majority of students on both undergraduate and postgraduate vocational degrees responded with feelings of moderate confidence. This varied for taught postgraduates, with the majority feeling either highly or moderately confident, as shown below.

Over 50% of students studying for both undergraduate and postgraduate vocational degrees are moderately confident in conducting legal research

Less than 30% of undergraduate students are highly confident in conducting legal research



FIGURE 1: A comparison of student feelings of confidence in conducting legal research at different levels of study



It is notable that student confidence amongst respondents does not noticeably increase during the course of an undergraduate degree. This changes on vocational courses; while the majority of students remain moderately confident, every respondent was either moderately or highly confident at this level. This can be seen to reflect the nature of vocational courses, with their greater emphasis on the skills necessary to begin a career practising law, including a more efficient approach to legal research.

When student participants discussed confidence, the most common reason identified as causing a lack of confidence was feeling like they were not aware when they had reached the point that their research was complete, and this was the case at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. When asked how they know when they have reached that point, an LLM student from University College London answered “I don’t! Sometimes it’s not just exhausting case law, sometimes a journal article will give it away, or something in a judgment will be perfect to answer a particular question. It can feel never-ending, though.” This was emphasised by an LLB student from City, University of London:

“I don’t think you ever really know, you just hand things in and hope that you get a good mark! You have to gauge it as you go along, but I found it hard to know if I had done enough or not.”

LLB student, City, University of London.

Staff members also have their perceptions of how confident students are with legal research. Lorna Rosbottom, Academic Liaison Librarian at the University of Westminster notes that, instead of using legal research platforms, students “use things like Google, and I think that ultimately comes from a lack of confidence.” She went on to elaborate on how this lack of confidence can manifest:

“If they’re asked to find a case, they might do that using Westlaw, and they’ll use reading lists or textbooks, but when there’s an assignment question, the idea that you might look in a textbook to identify key cases or further reading and follow that up, kind of goes out of the window. It’s almost like a panic response to type the essay question in Google - and this isn’t just something that law students do, a lot of the students I come across seem to forget what they know and what they’ve been doing week-on-week when they come to research an essay. They even forget their reading lists, and sometimes feel like they need to head off into the unknown, rather than feeling like they have a basis from which to start and then build on that.”

Lorna Rosbottom, Academic Liaison Librarian at the University of Westminster

To some extent, it could be suggested that a lack of confidence early on in an undergraduate degree can be caused by students needing to realise that search habits that they use in their everyday life are not appropriate for conducting thorough legal research. This was discussed by Maris Kask-Polacko, a Lecturer from the Law School at the University of Roehampton:

“The first year can feel like repeating things like a broken record, to get them off Wikipedia, to stop them being reliant on Google, to get them to use actual books and resources. It’s an ongoing struggle, which repeats year after year.”

It is also acknowledged that just because a student is confident in their ability in conducting legal research using one platform, this does not necessarily translate to confidence in their ability to conduct legal research more generally. Jackie Hanes, Academic Librarian at the University of Leicester, raised that in her experience “students primarily seem to use Westlaw. If the content they want, especially journals, aren’t on there they really seem to struggle to find it elsewhere.”

The need for additional student support

- Staff are frequently approached for assistance in finding legal material and on legal research questions
- There may be a relationship between the amount of teaching conducted and the amount of support subsequently required
- Students are just as likely to turn to online resources as the first point of support as they are to approach a member of staff

At every university which participated in the interview stage of this research, library and academic staff are making the effort to provide additional support to students, and this is undoubtedly a positive thing. When surveyed, the most common response from staff members was that students only occasionally approached them with problems using legal research platforms, with 42% of respondents indicating this. However, 58% of respondents indicated they frequently or very frequently received approaches for assistance with finding specific cases or legislative provisions. Similarly, 58% of respondents also indicated they frequently or very frequently have to assist students with legal research questions. The full details of how often students approached them for assistance can be found in Table 2 below.

There may be overlap between problems with using legal research platforms and finding cases and legislation, as these problems using platforms could extend to being unable to find a required case on a specific legal research platform.

Table 2: How often staff members report students approaching them for assistance, and why

Scale	Finding specific cases or legislation	Legal research questions	Problems using legal research platforms
Never	0%	3%	3%
Rarely	10%	10%	16%
Occasionally	32%	29%	42%
Frequently	42%	45%	32%
Very Frequently	16%	13%	6%

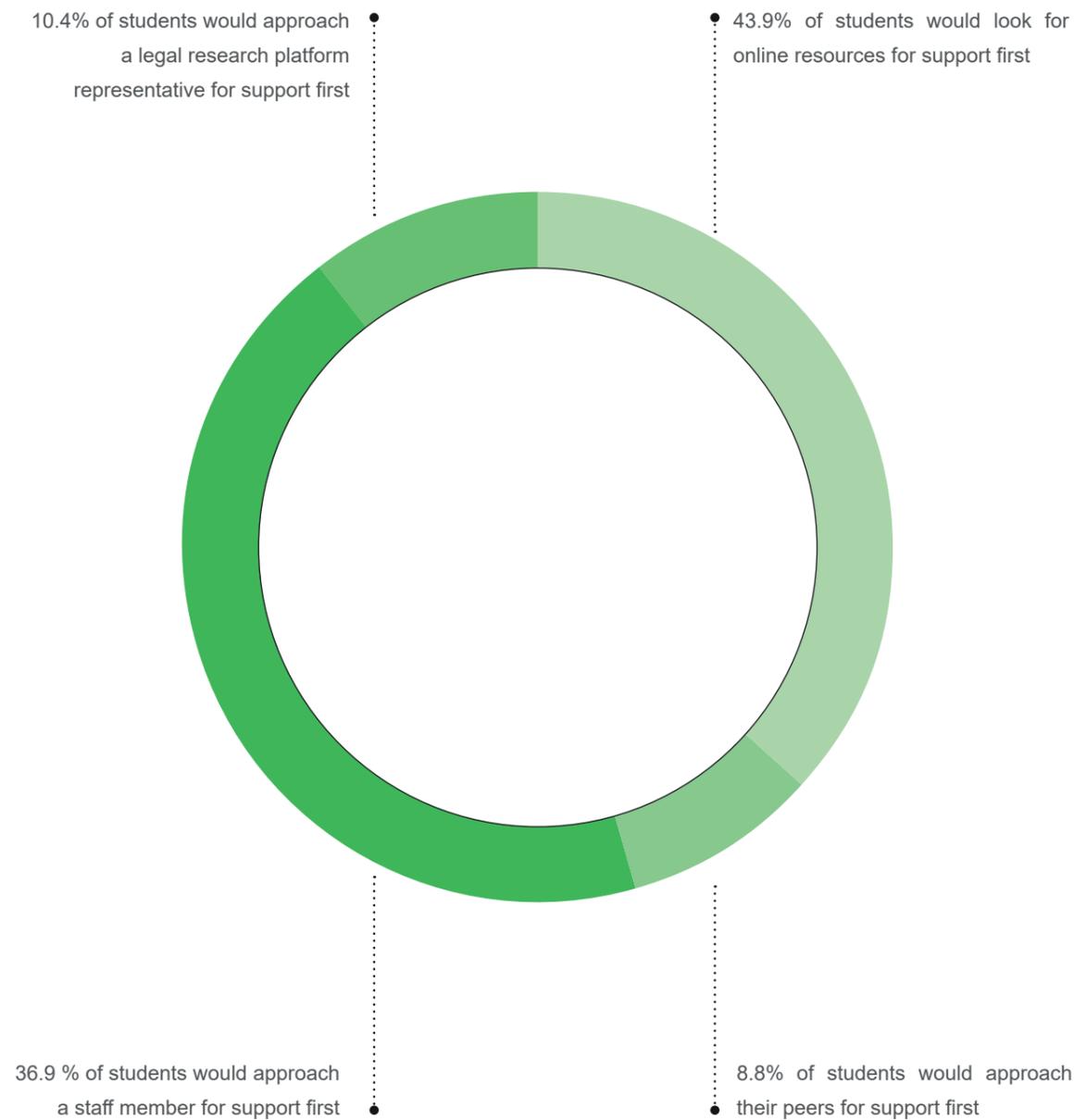
The equivalent question asked to students highlighted that individual students rarely approach academic or library staff for assistance on these issues. One explanation for this is that students as individuals do not approach staff for assistance particularly often, but these requests for support lead to common queries being identified.

There could be a relationship between the amount of legal research teaching conducted and the additional support that students require; Jackie Hanes, Academic Librarian at the University of Leicester, perceives that as she has moved from delivering one session to three sessions to first-year undergraduate students that their “questions have died down a little”, especially with more emphasis on ensuring that students have the “basics delivered to them, and available by video”, ensuring there is always a supporting resource available to affirm their knowledge.

When surveyed, while 36.9% of student respondents identified that they would approach a law librarian or member of academic staff for support, 43.9% responded that online resources would be the first thing they would look to in order to solve any query they have. As less common options, 10.4% would approach a student representative affiliated with a legal research platform provider for support first, and 8.8% would approach their peers. This suggests that while librarians and academic staff providing support is important, developing comprehensive online support materials is vital, and may work to reduce the level of in-person support required.

When considering this need for support alongside student levels of confidence, they appear to identify an issue which arguably relates to the variable way legal research is taught and the awareness that students have of the legal research platforms available to them. While students might always need assistance in finding specific materials, especially if they are in a specific niche which may not be covered by the major legal research platforms, students who are able to develop the skills and confidence to be able to find materials utilising a range of different search techniques on a variety of platforms will stand out amongst their peers.

FIGURE 2: A comparison of where students would turn to first for any support they need about legal research



Summary

The research findings discussed above have shown us there are issues surrounding law students learning about legal research.

Students do not seem to be aware of the full range of legal resources that their university subscribes to. This limits the legal information they are able to locate during their studies, as content can be exclusive to particular legal research platforms. It also leaves them unable to develop the skills to use a range of different platforms, which is important as they begin their legal careers where they may be an expectation to use specific platforms or quickly find legal material from a range of resources.

The majority of students only feel moderately confident in conducting legal research, and there is no notable development in how confident students feel during the course of an undergraduate degree. From focus groups we conducted, a reason identified by both undergraduate and postgraduate students for this lack of confidence is not being able to determine when an end-point has been reached. Staff also perceive this lack of high student confidence in conducting legal research and identify it as manifesting through behaviours such as reliance on Google and Wikipedia rather than the legal research platforms they have been introduced to. It is also perceived that students have different levels of confidence in using different platforms, with a relationship between how frequently they use a platform and how confident they feel using it.

An impact of this lack of confidence can be seen in the level of additional support that students need from staff members, with staff reporting that they are frequently approached for assistance in finding legal material and on legal research questions. While more students would look to online resources as a first option, 36.9% of students would approach a law librarian or member of academic staff for support as a first option.

How is legal research taught?

Three models of legal research teaching

This research has identified three models of legal research teaching which universities may adopt: *Frontloaded*, *Integrated* and *Online*. The model adopted is the most influential factor in deciding what legal research teaching is conducted, and when in the academic timetable it takes place.

The Frontloaded model

- Gives all students a baseline of legal research knowledge from the beginning of their degree
- Material delivered early might not be recalled by students when needed
- Perceived risk of student information 'overload'

The Frontloaded model involves all compulsory legal research teaching being conducted in the first few weeks of the first term of a degree programme.

Strengths

A benefit of this approach is that all students are given a baseline of what they are expected to know regarding legal research from the beginning of their degree, and they can focus on developing those skills as they locate readings for seminars and research material for assignments.

This model can give the staff delivering the legal research teaching an early appreciation of how the students are engaging with it, and where there may need to be additional support offered, as Ian Rogers, Learning & Teaching Librarian at Nottingham Trent University discussed: "When I'm doing the inductions at the beginning of the course I tend to do live demonstrations of things. On some of the courses they're given exercises to do', and where potential student weaknesses are identified earlier 'that's something I can look at – is there something I can do to redress that, in offering optional sessions, or video content for example."

Concerns

The first few weeks of a university term can be demanding for students, as they settle into a new environment, make new friends, adapt to a new way of learning and begin to find an appropriate balance between studying and socialising. An intensive amount of information delivered at this time is problematic, which was emphasised by Lorna Rosbottom, Academic Liaison Librarian at the University of Westminster:

“The LLB 1st and 2nd years get a short presentation in the first week of term – an induction, and a refresher session respectively – it’s a big generalised presentation which I must admit I don’t want to do again next year. It kind of feels like it’s at the wrong time, and it’s too much information being frontloaded very quickly”

This concern of too much information being frontloaded was termed overload by Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at London School of Economics, who discussed the challenges of trying to avoid it:

“I think the big challenge about delivering this kind of teaching is the timing - making sure that students know what they need when they need it, but also not overloading them so they get told everything very quickly and might not retain it when they do need it. Placing it appropriately and embedding it in the degree program is the ideal really.”

[Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at the London School of Economics](#)

In discussing the timing of teaching as a challenge and highlighting the concern of students not recalling information when they might need it if a lot of information is delivered very quickly, this suggests that at least some library staff involved in the teaching of legal research see overload as a potential problem to consider in adopting the Frontloaded model.

Where there is the potential to do so, there is the suggestion that universities are moving away from a Frontloaded model, as discussed by Lorna Rosbottom, Academic Liaison Librarian at the University of Westminster:

“Because I’ve run with how things were since arriving here, I’m starting to understand what’s happening in undergraduate law now and I think moving towards small chunks done often, with things focused around assignments they need to do, has been successful elsewhere and I think it’s what I’ll be looking at working on in the coming year.”

[Lorna Rosbottom, Academic Liaison Librarian at the University of Westminster](#)

Another aspect of the timing of legal research teaching is when specific legal research platforms are introduced to students. Where some universities including University College London and BPP introduce all of their major resources to students during the induction process in the first few weeks of their degree programmes in a Frontloaded model, others such as London School of Economics and Royal Holloway take the approach of staggering the introduction of legal research platforms and teaching over a period of time, sometimes as long as 18 months. This is to avoid overloading students with too much information too quickly, which Julie Hamley, Faculty Librarian at UWE Bristol discuss in highlighting that she and her colleague Sue are “aware of the potential for overload, and ask ourselves: what do they need to know, what are they going to engage with, from level one and onwards.” This approach is referred to as an Integrated model.

The Integrated model

- Material is delivered when it is perceived to be relevant across a degree programme
- Involves/requires a closer relationship between librarian and law school
- More teaching time demands on librarians

The Integrated model of legal research teaching is identified by the teaching being delivered at appropriate points over a degree programme. This is intended to ensure that students are introduced to information as they may need it, such as learning how to find EU material as they start a module on EU law.

Strengths

The Integrated model allows for more deliberately timed teaching to take place, as well as alter the teaching which occurs. This was discussed by Suzanne Traue, Subject Liaison Librarian for Law, Classics and Ancient History at University College London:

“Rather than the library holding optional drop-in sessions, we’re getting more stuff integrated into the courses themselves, either as an optional extra or a timetabled compulsory element. Ultimately, it’s about picking the most opportune moment to do it; rather than everything being delivered up-front at the start of the course, introducing them to different elements at the point at which they’re beginning to think about them.”

Suzanne Traue, Subject Liaison Librarian for Law, Classics and Ancient History at University College London

Where this model is adopted, it often involves a close relationship between law librarians and the law school they work with. Julie Hamley, Faculty Librarian at UWE Bristol described the relationship they have with their law faculty:

“We’ve reached the point now where we attend departmental meetings, program meetings, staff team meetings, quality assurance meetings, and this last year we are very much more embedded in the program design meetings. So where there are new modules, or there are changes, we are there and involved in the scrutiny of the way the program is structured - where the skills sit, where the support sits to achieve the outcomes of the program.”

Julie Hamley, Faculty Librarian at UWE Bristol

This close relationship means that appropriate points for this teaching can be identified and timetabled within the broader teaching curriculum, and can be integrated at the point of module and course design rather than having to be accommodated when the majority of the teaching time is already allocated to other requirements on the module or course.

Concerns

Adopting an Integrated model of teaching is challenging when a librarian isn't embedded within the law school. Instead, it is more likely that the relationship will be one of support and assisting where there is a shortfall in student understanding. Opportunities to enhance the relationship between librarian and law school exist, such as at Staff/Student liaison meetings, as discussed by Ian Rogers, Learning & Teaching Librarian at Nottingham Trent University:

“While they're primarily for the students, they're good for me as well as I can hear first-hand if students have any issues with the library that I can address. There are often academic staff in attendance, and it's often the only chance I have to talk to the lecturers as well.”

Ian Rogers, Learning & Teaching Librarian at Nottingham Trent University

As an Integrated model means more teaching takes place, this can present a particular challenge where a librarian is responsible for multiple subjects, as Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at London School of Economics highlights:

“Some of my colleagues have about 6 departments, with different kinds of needs, so the question is what can you realistically do? It's typical that they have 1 department they are embedded within, and 5 they assist on more of a surface level, because realistically they don't have the time to have that depth with all 6 at once.”

Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at London School of Economics

Even where librarians do not have responsibilities for multiple subjects, adopting an Integrated model means there is the likelihood that more teaching hours are required from librarians, not including any additional preparation time they may need to support particular modules. It may also result in students approaching with more queries about things they haven't yet been taught, as they may not be aware of what may be covered by future teaching they may receive, potentially further increasing the demands on law librarians in terms of the support required.

To address this concern, it is possible for library teams who are responsible for multiple subjects to adopt this integrated approach through making structural changes, such as those made by the University of Roehampton. They have adopted a structure which has moved away from explicit subject librarians, through adopting a system of Academic Engagement and Academic Achievement librarians.

In this system, the Academic Achievement librarians are responsible for the teaching of any skills and providing the bulk of library-based support that students require. The Academic Engagement librarian is responsible for liaising with the schools within their remit, developing and maintaining relationships which result in a more embedded approach, and working with the Academic Achievement librarians so that the required teaching and resources are provided. Sandra Celada, Academic Engagement Librarian at the University of Roehampton, discussed the benefits of their transition to this approach:

“One of the pros of that is that we can do much more project and investigation work, and we can specialise more in what we do, but it always raises the question of how do we communicate things back to the various teams in the library. In my role now, I think it's better in terms of communication. As I'm not student-facing anymore I have more time to look at things in more detail and go to department meetings. It gives more of an opportunity to hear about what is going on, take that back and work on that. It definitely feels like I've had better contact with the departments since we adopted this approach.”

Sandra Celada, Academic Engagement Librarian at the University of Roehampton

This is something that the members of staff in the law school also see as beneficial, as raised by Maris Kask-Polacko, Lecturer in the Law School at the University of Roehampton:

“From the department point of view it’s easier, this current system, because the academics, we know that we liaise with Sandra. It makes it more linear and clear for the members of staff, we know exactly who to approach with anything about resources or support.”

Maris Kask-Polacko, Lecturer in the Law School at the University of Roehampton

This system, or adopting the principles behind it, could work at other universities to assist in overcoming the time-based pressures that result in multi-subject librarians giving some of the subjects they are responsible for a lower amount of attention than others. While a semi-hierarchical structure with distinctly separate job-roles may not be possible, appropriate, or desired at every university, there are opportunities for closer relationships with schools in moving beyond individual librarians being responsible for handling multiple departments alone.

The Online model

- The Online model provides resources which are available at the point of student need
- Can be more comprehensive than face-to-face teaching
- Engagement can be tracked through ‘hits’, with content able to be signposted or edited at any time
- Emphasis is on students to engage with the resources as and when appropriate
- It is difficult to gauge how thoroughly students are absorbing knowledge

The online model involves the delivery of legal research teaching through written and video guides. As a primary method of teaching delivery, this was the least common model of teaching identified by this research, with only participants from the University of Exeter discussing it in detail.

Strengths

An advantage of the Online model is that it enables students to engage with legal research teaching material as and when they feel it is appropriate. Lee Snook, Liaison Librarian at the University of Exeter explained that in adopting this model of teaching an important factor is that “it is there so that students can use it when they need it. For example, if they don’t want or need it until week 6 then that’s fine, it’s there for them in week 6”. It is also identified as providing an opportunity for more comprehensive teaching resources to be made available, which means that after the initial time-investment which is necessary to set up a comprehensive online teaching resource, teaching time can instead be devoted to providing support. Lee continued:

“Rather than trying to pack everything into an hour lecture it meant we could be more comprehensive, and then offer one-to-one sessions for students who need more support or need to do something really precise that we wouldn’t cover in a lecture anyway.”

Lee Snook, Liaison Librarian at the University of Exeter

It is important that this Online model of teaching is able to track engagement, and can be adjusted to meet whatever educational needs that lecturers or students may have. Lee sees this as a particular strength of this approach:

“The way we deliver them via libguides, we can see which guides people have used, which pieces of content they’ve used, so if we put in a quiz or a video we can see if anyone has used them. If they haven’t it helps us strip out the stuff that nobody seems to be using. If they’re really engaging with particular elements of it then we know that’s useful. If we get feedback that students are struggling on a particular essay then we can build something in on that as well.”

Lee Snook, Liaison Librarian at the University of Exeter

As a model that is driven by technology, there is the potential to enhance the functionality behind it, which would increase its effectiveness, as Lee suggested:

“We’re hoping when we get a new VLE that the LTI integration in LibGuides, so the plan would be that if we map it properly with the proper metadata, a module would pull in the appropriately LibGuides content. We want to do more of that, to put it in front of students at the right time.”

This platform integration would seek to increase student engagement with these legal research teaching resources, through providing deliberate and timely reminders.

Concerns

This approach to teaching legal research places the emphasis on students to engage with these online resources. With this in mind, without any future developments and integrations with the platform, it is important that the availability of these resources is signposted appropriately, as Lee discussed:

“For the minute, we kind of have to chat to people and get them to drop the signposting in. We would like to integrate it more with our online learning environment. We’re using one right now which doesn’t allow us to integrate the content very easily, so yes, it’s great when the lecturer will flag the content up.”

Lee Snook, Liaison Librarian at the University of Exeter

Without the direct feedback from students that face-to-face teaching can offer, the Online model does not allow it to be easily determined how students are engaging with the material provided, as this is difficult to monitor beyond seeing how many ‘hits’ a particular page may have had.

Also, with reduced face-to-face contact, it can be harder to gauge how thoroughly students are absorbing the material, as their competency with legal research teaching will only be revealed when completing assessments.

Overlaps between the three models

It is important to note that these three models are not exclusive; a Frontloaded approach could feature a timed module about specific legal resources later in the degree programme, an Integrated approach could begin with the delivery of a lot of information during the induction process at the start of a degree, and both are highly likely to be supplemented by a varying level of online resources.

These online resources can include lecture slides and other supplementary supporting material, which Graham Ferris, Associate Professor at Nottingham Law School, sees as ensuring “that there’s always a baseline amount of information available for students who might miss sessions.” He went on to detail that these resources are especially important in providing greater support for distance-learning students.

Student preferences of legal research teaching models

When asked which model of legal research teaching model their university adopts, 50% of student respondents identified that their university adopts an Integrated model of legal research teaching, 37.5% identified a Frontloaded model, 8.9% identified an Online model. When asked which model they would prefer, 46.6% would prefer an Integrated model, 36.2% an Online model, and 15.5% a Frontloaded model, as shown overleaf.

Students who preferred an Integrated model identified that it would refresh and develop their legal research skills at deliberate intervals throughout the degree programme. The depth that more teaching would allow for was also seen as an advantage of this model, particularly where it relates to a particular module. One participant articulated this in saying “this would facilitate learning the appropriate research method in tandem with the legal topic being taught at that particular moment”.

Those who preferred the Online model identified two clear reasons. Firstly, it was identified as being convenient for students, with no requirement to attend lectures or be aware of optional sessions to learn what is required. Secondly, the self-taught nature of the Online model brings numerous advantages, as articulated by a respondent who replied that they “would prefer this model because I would have access to it at any time and because it is self-taught I would be able to move at my own pace.”

Those who preferred the Frontloaded model all identified an advantage in knowing everything they need to in order to conduct legal research before it was required of them. One respondent stated the timing of this model was preferable as “you are equipped with the skills early-on when the workload is light, allowing you time to get to grips with it before applying it to coursework and other legal research”.

Summary

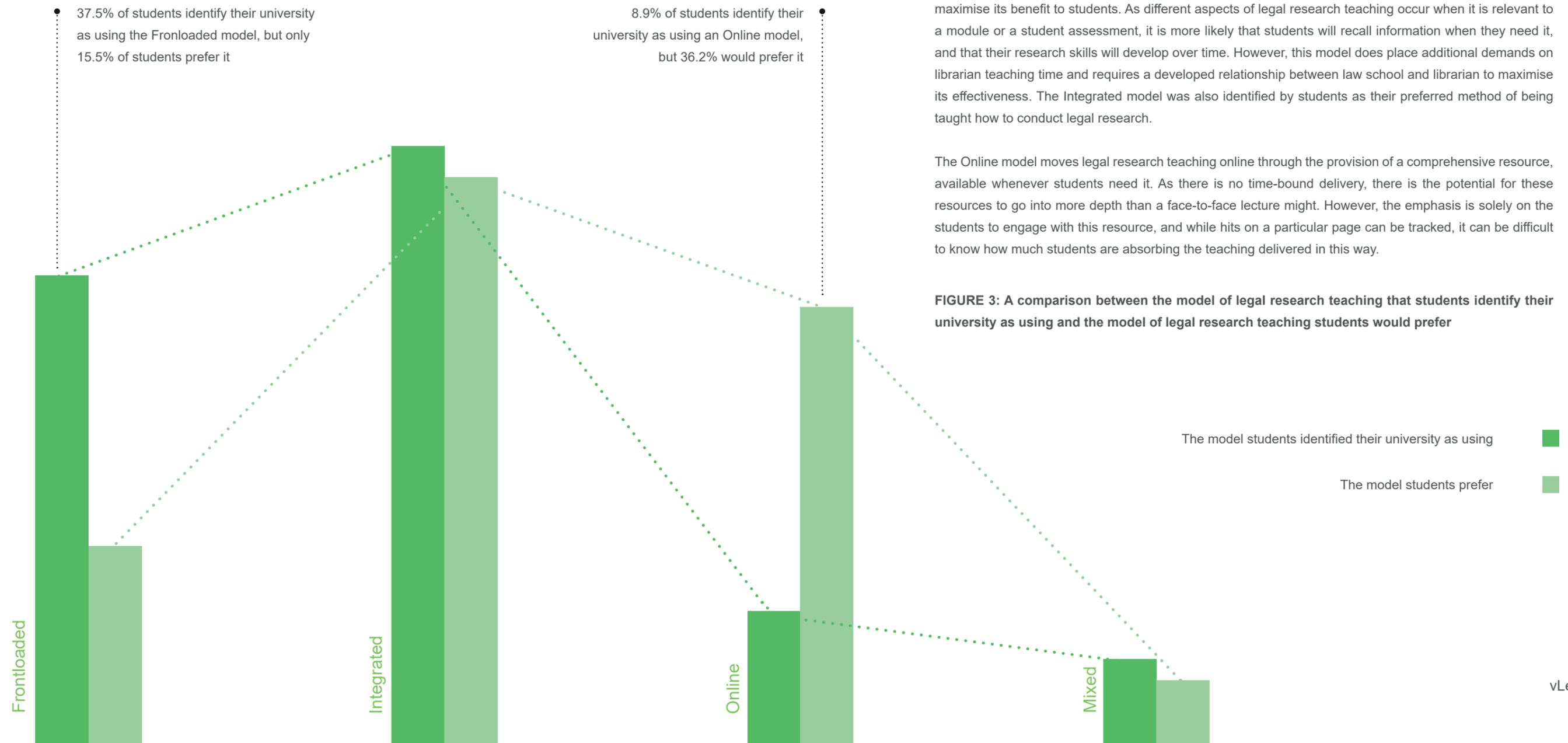
This section has introduced the three models of legal research teaching identified by this research, with the strengths of each being highlighted alongside the concerns that were shared by universities who adopted them.

While the Frontloaded model gives all students a baseline of legal research knowledge from the beginning of their degree, there are notable concerns over the amount of information that is delivered, with student overload being perceived as a risk that has an impact on student recall of information.

The Integrated model was seen as the most preferable model, with teaching being timed to attempt to maximise its benefit to students. As different aspects of legal research teaching occur when it is relevant to a module or a student assessment, it is more likely that students will recall information when they need it, and that their research skills will develop over time. However, this model does place additional demands on librarian teaching time and requires a developed relationship between law school and librarian to maximise its effectiveness. The Integrated model was also identified by students as their preferred method of being taught how to conduct legal research.

The Online model moves legal research teaching online through the provision of a comprehensive resource, available whenever students need it. As there is no time-bound delivery, there is the potential for these resources to go into more depth than a face-to-face lecture might. However, the emphasis is solely on the students to engage with this resource, and while hits on a particular page can be tracked, it can be difficult to know how much students are absorbing the teaching delivered in this way.

FIGURE 3: A comparison between the model of legal research teaching that students identify their university as using and the model of legal research teaching students would prefer



The variable delivery of legal research teaching

Teaching legal research platforms: workshops vs lectures

- The hands-on experience offered by workshops is seen as beneficial to students
- The ability to host workshops on legal research platforms is determined by resource constraints
- Students prefer a mixed approach to learning legal research

Whichever model of legal research teaching a university adopts, there are some common factors such as an induction session shortly after a student begins their degree, typically delivered as a lecture to the entire cohort. Beyond this, however, and there is little consistency in how or when further legal research teaching is conducted.

When examining how legal research platforms are taught to students, the method of delivery changes between lectures and hands-on workshops depending on the university. Where universities use lectures rather than workshops, this is typically because there is a lack of resources to be able to deliver it in a way which would enable students to have more hands-on experience with legal research platforms during the session.

There is an acknowledgement that this more hands-on approach offered by workshops has benefits which a lecture introducing legal research platforms does not, which was recognised by Graham Ferris, Associate Professor at Nottingham Law School. While he uses a legal research platform to give examples in lectures, he went on to elaborate that they “host workshops to teach students to use the platforms, which are library-led. They are all software-based, rather than theory-based, so the students get experience with support there on-hand”.

When students are going through exercises in a workshop it gives the staff responsible for delivering the session the ability to answer any questions and resolve any issues that students may encounter, rather than having to offer support on an individual basis. In discussing the workshops she runs at University College London, Subject Liaison Librarian for Law, Classics & Ancient History Suzanne Traue highlighted this support as a key concern in running workshops:

“Most of our labs have a capacity of 20 people, so I did 14 workshops of an hour each. It was manageable, but any more than that I’d need to rope other people in to support. It’s better to have smaller groups where possible.”

Suzanne Traue, University College London, Subject Liaison Librarian for Law, Classics & Ancient History

FIGURE 4: A comparison of students preferred methods of learning about legal research

Lectures	52%
Library sessions	44%
Online user guides	43%
Video guides	34%
Personal tutoring	30%
Printed user guides	15%



Lorna Rosbottom, Academic Liaison Librarian at the University of Westminster, raised the concern that there are limitations in what is practically possible in saying “with a cohort of 300 students, it’s not realistic to do practical workshops as we might with other subjects.” She went on to discuss that this is not realistic because of limitations of space, in terms of access to large enough computer labs to run workshop sessions, or time, in terms of not having enough time to be able to host enough sessions to cover an entire cohort while maintaining responsibilities for other subjects. These can be seen as determining factors in whether a university can offer hands-on workshops with legal research platforms.

However, there are possibilities to overcome the lack of workshop space, which was something discussed by Holger Aman, former Holborn Library Manager at BPP:

“The teaching I do of platforms is a bit of a hybrid due to lack of sizable computer labs. It’s taught lecture-style, but almost every student now has a laptop, so they are encouraged to follow along and ask questions to go deeper into things they want to.”

[Holger Aman, former Holborn Library Manager at BPP](#)

While this approach would exclude students who do not have access to a laptop, it does provide an opportunity to adopt aspects of a workshop-style approach during a lecture-style presentation, while still delivering the same knowledge to those who are unable to participate in following along with examples.

When students were surveyed asking to select how they preferred to learn about legal research, lectures were the most popular method with 52% of respondents identifying them as a preference, 44% of respondents preferred library sessions, and 43% preferred online user guides. Video guides (34%), personal tutoring (30%) and printed user guides (15%) were less common as preferences. Overall, this shows that while each individual student has a preference of how they like to learn about legal research, on the whole students prefer a variety of teaching methods and supporting materials to be made available to them.

Optional sessions to support compulsory teaching

- Student uptake of optional sessions is highly variable
- Optional sessions can be used to deliver advanced skills, particularly where the Integrated model of teaching is adopted

As we have seen, the teaching of legal research platforms differs in terms of method of delivery, but it also differs on whether students are required to attend or not. An optional session can enable universities that face constraints based on adequately sized computer labs or librarian teaching time to deliver hands-on teaching of legal research platforms, as there is an awareness that a proportion of students are unlikely to attend anything which is not compulsory.

When discussing optional scenario-based workshops to introduce students to Halsbury’s Laws of England and other practitioner texts, Stephanie Verlander, Library Services Co-ordinator at The University of Law raised the perception that students seem to have of optional sessions:

“We generally find that when they come they perceive it well, but the challenge is getting students there. They think “if it’s important they’d timetable it”. The take-up can vary at different campuses, but we’ve started to look at ways to embed these workshops into the curriculum, working at campus-level.”

[Stephanie Verlander, Library Services Co-ordinator at The University of Law](#)

Where some universities offer optional sessions in support of their compulsory sessions to undergraduate students, they find that attendance on these is low enough that invitations are extended to LLM students who may need a refresher on certain things, as Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at London School of Economics highlighted:

“With elective sessions, it’s always hard because you don’t know what level everyone who attends will be at. I’m always trying to look at ways to advertise them, because if they’re just targeted at undergrads you don’t get so many, so then you open it up and you get a very mixed level of students coming, so it’s difficult to satisfy everyone’s needs, but that’s the nature of HE.”

Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at London School of Economics

It is important to note that the quote above suggests the attendance at optional sessions is an issue across Higher Education more broadly, rather than being unique to law students, which Sian Downes, Southend Campus Librarian at the University of Essex also emphasises when reflecting on her time at Royal Holloway:

“I tend to find from other courses that if things are optional then you don’t tend to get that many students coming to learn skills that they need and so they end up coming for one-to-ones. It’s much easier if you can see them all together and do a group exercise and a workshop and do it that way.”

Sian Downes, Southend Campus Librarian at the University of Essex

Where a university adopts the Frontloaded model and only provides a compulsory induction session which focuses on legal research, the material delivered in optional sessions may be of more importance than when universities provide multiple compulsory sessions through an Integrated model, where optional sessions are more likely to be used to deliver advanced skills. This was affirmed by Suzanne Traue, Subject Liaison Librarian for Law, Classics & Ancient History at University College London:

“This year, we have run an optional legal research skills workshop, during which they get a lecture on how to prepare for mooting. The idea is that this workshop equips them with the skills to do that kind of research.”

Suzanne Traue, Subject Liaison Librarian for Law, Classics & Ancient History at University College London

Summary

This section discussed two of the variables relating to the delivery of legal research teaching which differ between universities.

While it is recognised that the hands-on experience offered by using workshops to teach students how to use legal research platforms is positive, the ability for a university to conduct them can be restricted by resource constraints, specifically space and teaching time. These constraints are interlinked, with smaller computer labs necessitating a greater amount of teaching time in order to provide workshop sessions to an entire cohort.

The majority of universities include at least one compulsory session of legal research teaching, typically during the induction period for new students. Beyond this, however, there is a split as some universities continue to host compulsory sessions, and others offer optional sessions to their students. The student uptake of these optional sessions is variable, with a concern that students perceive anything delivered via an optional session as less important. Optional sessions can be used to deliver advanced skills, particularly where universities adopt the Integrated model of legal research teaching.

The potential of student peer support

Student peer support

- Student peer support is encouraged by universities through ambassador schemes
- Student friendship groups are an ad-hoc source of support
- A minority of students surveyed would approach a peer as an initial option for support

While the majority of students would initially seek support either online or from a law librarian or member of academic staff, approximately 20% of students would approach a fellow student for support, either as a peer or in their role as a student representative of a legal research platform provider.

While just 8.8% of students surveyed would approach a peer as their first option for support, this does not support what was discussed by a number of participants in the qualitative stages of this research. Indeed, it was highlighted that students were more likely to turn to their peers for assistance before approaching a member of staff, as Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at the London School of Economics discussed:

“We found that students go to each other before a member of staff, that’s why we tried the student ambassadors for digital literacy, and why we are using the academic ambassadors now. There’s a strong tendency to ask each other for help before they come to us, so it is an important thing to consider, and I know a lot of universities are looking at how students contribute to that support network, and how to make that part of a structure across various departments.”

Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at the London School of Economics

This is something that was also raised in the focus group stage of the research, as two first-year LLB students from Royal Holloway discussed how they would often help each other or approach members of their friendship circle if they were having problems with particular aspects of their studies. While their experience indicates that this support takes place on an ad-hoc basis, universities are working to provide supportive structures, as Maria’s quote above highlights.

From the library mentor system adopted at Nottingham Trent University, to the peer-to-peer learning programmes at UWE Bristol and the University of Exeter, universities are recognising the potential for students assisting each other and creating a structure to maximise the benefits it can offer. There is also a benefit to the students who participate in support schemes, as “any recognised student role also helps with employability, which comes up much more frequently now, especially in more competitive degrees such as law”, as Maria points out.

Legal research platform student representatives

- Librarians offer support to student representatives, from room bookings to fielding any queries outside of their remit
- The training given to student representatives is seen by librarians as important
- Sessions hosted by student representatives are optional, and so have the same potential issues with attendance as other optional sessions do
- Between student uptake and company provision of student representative schemes, there is no guarantee of consistency across years

One thing raised across a number of interviews was the role of student representatives, who are employed and trained directly by the companies who provide legal research platforms. These were perceived as positive by those universities who have them, with the support they offer being seen as supplementary to the provision being made by both law school and library staff. As discussed above, they were also seen as someone students would be more likely to approach than their peers as the first point of contact for support, with 10.5% of students surveyed identifying they would approach an employed student representative.

Librarians are keen to support these student representatives where possible. They offer practical assistance in terms of aiding with room bookings, or further publicising any sessions that these representatives host, as Lee Snook, Liaison Librarian at the University of Exeter describes:

“They get central training from Westlaw and Lexis, I do tend to meet up with them and say hello, so they can signpost what we do too. I’m pretty happy with the training they get, and the level of support that they can deliver. A lot of students are happier to chat to another student than they are in coming to see us, they like that peer to peer support.”

Lee Snook, Liaison Librarian at the University of Exeter

The centralised training offered by the legal resource platform providers is seen as an important factor, as there is the perception that these student reps are kept up-to-date on any changes or updates to these platforms, especially as not every platform provider necessarily communicates these to academics or library staff effectively.

Librarians are also keen that these representatives do not act in isolation, and so offer support so they are not acting as the sole point of contact for any queries that students might approach them with, particularly where these queries are outside of their remit as a student rep whose role is to offer support on a specific legal research platform; “they’ve been encouraged to talk to us so they’re not trying to do everything in isolation, or handle every enquiry that a student has about things. That’s the kind of thing, again, which is offering a peer support role, in very specific areas”, as Maria Bell, Learning Support Services Manager at London School of Economics, discussed.

Alongside the advantages that these representatives provide to the law schools they are situated within, there is also an awareness of the advantages that being a rep can provide to the individual student in terms of employability, as discussed above.

However, student reps are not without their flaws. Arguably the largest of these is that the sessions they host are entirely optional for students to attend, and as with any optional session there is no guarantee that students will take advantage of them. Beyond this, there is the issue of continuity, which can manifest in one of two ways. Firstly, these positions require students who are willing to apply and undertake the appropriate training, and if that does not happen then there will be no representative. Secondly, the legal research providers themselves do not offer the student rep scheme at every university, and they can elect to discontinue the scheme at a university at any time. This lack of guaranteed consistency can cause issues when it comes to a university planning which supportive sessions to offer, leading to potential duplication of support when these representatives are in place.

Summary

This section has discussed the findings relating to the ways student peer support is encouraged by universities, both in formalised peer support schemes and through legal research platform student representatives.

While a minority of students surveyed identified that they would approach a peer for support before any other option, universities perceive that students will approach each other before they would approach a staff member. To encourage this, a number of universities have developed schemes to formalise this support through student ambassador or mentor schemes. This also rewards the students who participate in these schemes by enhancing their employability.

Legal research platform student representatives were seen to be beneficial, with the training they receive being particularly important. Librarians are frequently keen to assist these representatives, particularly with tasks such as room bookings. The sessions that these representatives host are optional, and so share the issues with optional sessions discussed above. There is also no guarantee of these representatives being available year-on-year, as the ongoing provision of the scheme is reliant on the legal research platform provider continuing it, and on suitable candidates applying for the positions.

Conclusions

The impact that variable teaching of legal research has on students is important to consider. The majority of students only feel moderately confident in conducting legal research. This moderate confidence is one of the factors in the need for more student support, particularly around problems using legal research platforms. While it cannot be determined from this research what relationship there might be between which model of legal research teaching a university adopts and how confident their students feel in conducting legal research, this is something which merits further investigation.

To look beyond a degree programme alone, is variable legal research teaching leaving some students disadvantaged compared to their peers when progressing to vocational degrees, or when starting their career? As discussed in the background section of this report, at least one large law firm in the UK arranges intensive legal research teaching sessions to ensure that their trainees are capable of conducting legal research in the way that they require. The implication of this is that they have concerns over the consistency in the quality of the legal research skills their trainees arrive with.

Can universities be supported in legal research teaching?

While universities take the lead on the delivery of research education, could external organisations support them in this? Through initiatives like the Justis Academy event in 2017 and the recent Law Student Legal Research Handbook, Justis has worked to supplement the legal research teaching conducted by universities by providing additional supportive material. The reception these initiatives have received from students suggests that legal research platform vendors can play a role in enhancing the teaching of legal research skills beyond proficiency tests relating to the use of their own products.

Beyond this, what role could law firms play in ensuring that universities are equipping students with the legal research skills they need? If law firms are hosting sessions to ensure their trainees are meeting a certain standard, as discussed above, this suggests that alongside the difference between legal research teaching between universities, there may also be a difference between legal research for academic and professional reasons. If this is the case, it could be beneficial to universities, firms and students if law firms had an involvement in the undergraduate teaching of legal research.

A standardised approach to teaching legal research?

This research shows that the teaching of legal research as part of a law degree is something which varies between universities, and this variance can be notable. From universities which teach legal research solely online through extensive written and video guides to universities who host multiple legal research sessions across a degree programme, there is no standardised approach to equipping students with the skills they need to conduct effective legal research. However, should there be?

The research we have conducted suggests that library staff acknowledge that a Frontloaded model is problematic and is often adopted due to a lack of resources. Similarly, only 15.5% of students surveyed would prefer this approach to learning legal research. The Online model offers the potential to be comprehensive in the teaching resources it can deliver, which can be added to and tailored over time, although this model requires students engaging with material in a self-study manner. However, while a minority of respondents to our survey study at universities which adopt this model, 36.2% of students have indicated they would prefer it.

The most preferred option among students is the Integrated model; this research suggests that law librarians recognise that this avoids issues around frontloading, and instead delivers legal research teaching at deliberately timed points throughout a degree programme. As this model offers the greatest potential benefits to students, it is predominantly the approach that this research would identify as the most appropriate standardised approach. However, considering the advantages the online model offers, a standardised approach should also seek to provide thorough online resources, so that students have a resource available at any point of need. As 43.9% of students have indicated that they would seek online resources to answer any queries before approaching a member of academic staff or a law librarian, well developed online resources could also work to reduce the frequency of demand for in-person student support.

There is no quick-fix to addressing the variable way legal research is taught, which is especially true when the timetable of an academic year is a factor in both the planning of future teaching provision and in when the delivery of legal research teaching can take place. Should universities consider a standardised approach, we feel this model would go some way to reducing the variability in legal research teaching. Ultimately, the largest benefit of a standardised approach would be felt by the students, and the reduction of any skills divide which exists between them and their peers when advancing to applying for training contracts and moving into employment.

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Contact us

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