

Dutch University Law Librarians' UK Tour

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Dutch University Law Librarians' UK Tour

Conrad van Laer, from Maastricht University Library, and five colleagues came to Britain earlier this year and he has kindly sent us a report of their visit.

Introduction

After two years of preparation, six Dutch law librarians visited four British law libraries, from 10 to 14 May 2004. The group consisted of law librarians affiliated to academic institutions in the Netherlands. The journey was made possible thanks to smooth organisation by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and, of course, thanks to the travel budgets made available by the Dutch universities. CILIP proved to be important in making our tour successful since it organised the trips and coped with the complexities of the British railway system. For several reasons, we had selected the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (IALS) Library in London; the Wills Memorial Library in Bristol; the Bodleian Law Library in Oxford, and the Templeman Library in Canterbury for our visits. All the British staff showed great hospitality and their presentations proved to fit in with our interests.

Discovering new facts

We were happy to have been shown the two largest law libraries in the UK: the library of the IALS and the Bodleian Law Library in Oxford. Nevertheless, the two smaller ones, in Bristol and Canterbury, resemble more closely the average Dutch law library affiliated to universities.

Of course, we share many problems, like shortage of space, budgets and staff. It is more interesting to note the new facts we have discovered, like the commercial service unit of IALS, employing four people and having two hundred subscriptions from big law firms. It was also impressive to hear in Oxford that revenues from donations are about £120,000 p.a. for a range of projects, including the IT room and weekend opening. Donations, which include long standing trust funds, make up 48% of the annual book purchases, although this dependence on sponsorship could be risky too. In addition, we were not aware of the

role of student representatives of Lexis, although it will be difficult to import that role to the Netherlands where strong competition between Lexis and Westlaw is lacking. Finally, we discovered nice guides used in training sessions with law students like the step-by-step guide *How to find articles in legal journals* based on the holdings and systems at Kent. This guide is part of a collection of about thirty online guides at <<http://library.kent.ac.uk/library/info/subjectg/law/>>

Two important topics deserve more attention since diverging views seem to exist. These topics are (1) Internet portals for lawyers and (2) Library instruction to develop internet information skills. Both themes provoked a lot of discussion in our group during the UK tour.

Making internet portals

In the Netherlands, there exists a scheme of cooperation to compile an internet portal called Internet Law Library <<http://www.portill.nl/>>. Therefore, we were interested in meeting colleagues involved in the development or maintenance of internet portals. We knew that IALS is developing the Law section of the Social Science Information Gateway in partnership with the University of Bristol Law Library. We knew also of the existence of LAWLINKS which has been solely developed and maintained by Sarah Carter, the law librarian of the University of Kent. Although LAWLINKS does not belong to a cooperative scheme, the LAWLINKS web pages are highly regarded. The explanations given during the journey have shed some light on the features of the SOSIG Law Gateway <<http://www.sosig.ac.uk/law/>> and the LAWLINKS portal <<http://library.kent.ac.uk/library/lawlinks/>>. The SOSIG Law Gateway consists of subsections arranged according to an adapted version of the Universal Decimal Classification. It contains structured descriptive records created by the two editors, and offers searching by subject heading and keywords. LAWLINKS is not embedded within an encompassing website for the social sciences like SOSIG, which has to be an advantage from the perspective that the method of searching legal materials is rather different from methods employed in other disciplines. LAWLINKS contains a hierarchy of legal sources enabling students to detect what is important. Maybe LAWLINKS is less sophisticated and easier to browse in the view of law students. This could be an explanation for the surprising fact that LAWLINKS was the most visited site from the SOSIG Law section from 23 Apr 2004 to 23 May 2004!

Teaching internet skills

The Virtual Training Suite <<http://www.vts.rdn.ac.uk/tutorial/lawyers>> is a self-instruction web-based tutorial, based on SOSIG and not bound to an institution. Digital tutorials like the Virtual Training Suite may support classroom teaching; this particular use is evidence of a more structured method of teaching internet skills

where the 'teach-yourself' tools have been embedded within the faculty curriculum. Oxford prefers this more structured approach and first-year students know that it is important, although not compulsory, to follow the legal skills course, but Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer has expressed concerns about the lack of information skills of trainee solicitors and is generously supporting the Bodleian Law Library and the Law Faculty in a joint IT training development project, including the creation of the IT Room in the Bodleian Law Library. It is primarily intended for teaching the Legal Research Skills Programme, introducing students to legal research materials in electronic and hard copy format, whilst developing and testing basic IT and teamwork skills.

The structured method of teaching internet skills could be reconsidered if sufficient computer teaching spaces are not available or where students are less motivated to follow lessons of hours or even days. Nowadays, the Google factor and the growth in online journals make students feel they are competent researchers and they expect that they can find everything needed in electronic format. If traditional classroom based information skills training is no longer viable, personal troubleshooting by library staff of only five minutes at the point of need can guarantee more lasting results. For reasons like those mentioned, the Templeman Library has chosen the individualised approach of using e-mail, which offers the option to chat with students, even 24/7. Drop-in sessions, like those scheduled for the Freshfields IT Room in Oxford, maybe have the advantages of both approaches. Apart from this, the structured and the individualised approach to internet instruction are complementary.

Some concluding remarks

The UK tour made has enriched us a lot, and maybe our British hosts have learned a bit from us. Not only in the context of teaching retrieval skills, we have found more professional solutions than present in the Netherlands, but that should not be a surprise given the size of the British group of law librarians. To illustrate this observation, attention should be paid to LAWPATHS <<http://library.kent.ac.uk/library/lawpaths/>>, the project to develop a resource database of materials to support the learning and teaching of legal information research skills. The Dutch equivalent is a short list and less elaborated.

Almost the same is true for FLAG, the Foreign Law Guide Project <<http://ials.sas.ac.uk/library/flag/flag.htm>> referring to the printed collections of foreign, international and comparative law in UK libraries. This electronic project of IALS makes it possible to identify overlap and gaps on a national level and it offers a tool for weeding, but such a device has been abandoned in the Netherlands since maintenance proved to be more expensive than the savings accomplished by it. British and Dutch resources seem to be on a different level, but that does not exclude considering more international cooperation to improve law librarianship.