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Article

British and Irish Association of Law Librarians (BIALL) Legal Information Literacy Statement

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1. Introduction

This report on the BIALL legal information literacy (IL) project provides the background on why the project came into being and how it was supported.

2. British and Irish Association of Law Librarians

It is helpful to outline the background of BIALL for those who have little or no experience of information services provision in the legal sector. The Association was formed in 1969 as an independent, self-supporting body representing the interests of legal information professionals and suppliers of legal literature in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. BIALL's mission and goals are:

- To promote better administration and exploitation of law libraries and legal information units.
- To enhance the professionalism and status of the legal information profession.
- To generally benefit members of BIALL in their work.
- To unite and co-ordinate the interests, opinions and activities of legal information professionals into a single influential voice.

2.1 Reports of a problem

The Association hosts an annual conference which features a members' 'Have your say' session. At the 2011 session, a BIALL member based in the commercial sector voiced their concern at the legal research competency of recent joiners to their firm, stating that senior partners were asking in-house law librarians to verify the research presented by new trainees. This member also queried the role of academic law librarians, questioning how legal research skills are being taught at academic and vocational level and stating clearly that the legal research skills of new joiners are not meeting the expectations of employers. The following debate prompted one of the authors to propose that BIALL should investigate the issue in depth, with the aim of producing legal IL guidance in the form of a toolkit, similar to legal IL guidance devised in the United States and IL initiatives within the NHS (Choolhun 2012).

2.2 BIALL Legal Information Literacy Working Group

Consequently, BIALL established a Working Group (WG) to look at the issue in greater detail. Members of the WG are listed below:

- Emily Allbon – City University, London (BIALL Law Librarian of the Year 2012)

- Ruth Bird – Oxford University (Chair of the WG and author of a chapter on legal IL in the International Association of Law Librarians International Handbook of Legal Information Management)
- Natasha Choolhun – The College of Law
- Peter Clinch – Cardiff University (retired)
- Tracey Dennis – Inner Temple Library
- Julie Ferris – Allen & Overy
- Kathy Jacob – Pinsent Masons
- Loyita Worley – Reed Smith

3. Methods

As the problem had been identified by practice librarians and concerned the legal research ability of recent trainees, it was decided to survey law firm and barristers' chamber librarians based in practice, rather than to include law librarians based in the academic sector.

The survey achieved a high response rate, 86 replies, which indicated that the results were representative of law librarians based in the commercial legal sector. The WG felt that the findings, particularly those on Google, should be used to inform the drafting of IL guidance for the legal sector. Whilst a new digital lens has been recently formulated to apply IL skills in the digital environment, it is important to understand that legal research in the workplace needs additional sector-specific guidance to manage risk.

4. Drafting the Statement

The WG took the American Law Student Information Literacy Standards as their initial starting point. In 2010 a self-formed group, made up of American Association of Law Librarians (AALL) members, drafted a set of standards to address IL in the specific context of legal research. After consideration by the AALL Board a set of Law Student Research Competencies and Information Literacy Principles were adopted in 2011 (AALL 2011).

Whilst the WG used the American standards as a framework, the following considerations were also put forward:

- The legal IL statement should apply across all areas – law school, law firm, bar education, court libraries, Legal Practice Courses etc.
- The WG would review & synthesise existing standards set by the Bar Standards Board, the Institute of Legal Executives and the Solicitors Regulatory Authority.
- The WG would structure a format that can be used as a checklist.

By taking the core documents of the relevant regulatory and training bodies and analysing these for content, duplication and overlap, it became evident that there was a common core of expectations and requirements that constitute mastery of legal research, which could be adapted to work with accepted IL concepts, and would also be relevant to the digital literacy skills that have evolved separately (SCONUL 2012).

4.1 Completion

The BIALL Legal Information Literacy Statement was officially launched in August 2012. The statement is available to all and can be accessed via the BIALL website (BIALL 2012).

5. Conclusion

Since the launch of the BIALL Legal Information Literacy Statement the WG has received very positive feedback. Firms have notified the WG that they will use the Statement to revise in-house legal training materials. It is important to note that whilst the remit of the survey was restricted to law librarians in practice in England and Wales, the WG has had feedback from law librarians in jurisdictions such as Canada and the United States.

A complete report on the BIALL legal IL project will be submitted to the Library and Information Research Journal's special issue on IL and lifelong learning (publication due May 2013).

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