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Too Cool for (Law) School? Using Technology to Engage Students in Legal Skills

Emily Allbon [1]

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ABSTRACT

Leading web portal Lawbore was first launched at City University London by the law librarian in 2002, quickly connecting with students thanks to its bold, image-lead navigation and informal approach to presenting the law. In 2007 a new area, Learnmore, was added: a legal skills wiki born out of a desire to see the building blocks of law given more attention. It encompassed multimedia resources around mooting, research, legal writing and other skills. Collaboration with a new lecturer in 2010 kicked off a new era for the site; Learnmore is unique for its quirky style, utilisation of different mediums (text, video, audio, talking slideshows and prezi) and emphasis on student-collaborated content. 2012 heralded a five-month JISC-funded Learnmore app development. This paper offers a case study of the Learnmore resource, covering detail of the development of content, the visual branding and peer-learning community elements. The author seeks to look both at the practical elements of using technology to aid student learning in law and the pedagogical impact of such a strategy. The effectiveness of using certain techniques to ease the transition into Law School is discussed, as is whether or not involving students in the creation of content makes a difference to their levels of engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

My role at City has always been a little different; yes it involves managing a library, collection development and liaison with the law school, but it also includes teaching and assessment within a core module (Legal Method) and coordinating mooting for the academic side of the school. Having an office right at the core of the law library has meant being tapped up for information on a whole range of issues from the expected study, research and law side of student life, to careers and mooting. Whilst obviously referring on when another professional is better equipped to offer support, it has meant that I have been able to get a real feel for the concerns students have, and the drive to set about creating resources to help them in future.

2. LAWBORE

In 2002 I created a small website called Lawbore <http://lawbore.net> for City University students. In these early days the website was primarily a gateway to free web resources, developed because of my concern that students were so reliant on the subscription legal databases, they were often oblivious to high

quality free legal resources. Gradually the site grew into something much more community-based and gained new features every one or two years. A decade later and I still run this site.

Today Lawbore is composed of four main parts: the Directory, City Hub, Future Lawyer and Learnmore. It is available to any law student worldwide and content changes frequently. The *Directory* originates from the old gateway part of the site: containing links to useful websites, commentary, key reports and now blogs, on different modules studied on law courses. There are also newsfeeds and Flickr photostream of images from City. The *City Hub* is focused on our own students and features a striking book carousel to flag up our latest collection additions, law school news, the Lawbore twitter feed, key City links, events calendar for London, information about e-resources and small ads service. *Future Lawyer* <http://blog.lawbore.net> is a careers blog, which features news, articles and interviews. Unique to the blog is the emphasis on contributions featuring our students and alumni. There are regular (and sometimes eclectic) columns from writers including: Getting Ahead in Law (written by a former partner at a law firm) and Law and Mortar (historical look at buildings with legal significance). The site also features many reviews of legal events. This case study will be focused on *Learnmore* <http://learnmore.lawbore.net> - the legal skills wiki.

3. LEARNING LEGAL SKILLS

Legal Method is a compulsory term one module for all first year undergraduates at City, but it has been one which students find difficult to engage with. It acts as a foundation; covering the basics around sources and functions of law, doctrine of precedent, statutory interpretation, legal research, mooted and the study-specific skills like note taking and answering essay or problem questions. Students are keen to get going with the exciting substantive law and often can't see the point of these subjects until later in the year.

Taking legal research as an example, for many new undergraduates they may not have had much to do with a library before starting university. If they need to find some information they will google it or ask their friends. It is not unusual for students to be unfamiliar with the concept of using an index within a book, never mind ensuring they are looking at the most authoritative version of a case. Many students don't take the time to learn how to use the sometimes-complex legal databases. This is of concern as studies have shown that students are less-technology savvy than we often assume; ensuring students have their hands on the most up-to-date law, and not something they scraped off google is a priority. [2] Paid-for resources often come off second-best thanks to the Google grip around our students' throats. Nicholas and Rowlands note that young people's 'apparent facility with computers disguises some worrying problems', amongst these being unable to evaluate information, assess relevance or search in anything other than natural language. [3]

Technology itself has been blamed for deterioration in the research process with Nicholas Carr (2010) casting doubt on the critical and analytical skills of individuals, able to read faster on the web, but less thoroughly. He describes the internet as '*an interruption system. It seizes our attention only to scramble it*', suggesting we want to be interrupted because we don't like feeling out of touch, '*each interruption - email, tweet, instant message, RSS headline - brings us valuable information*'. [4] But our brain has to reorient itself each time, which adds to the cognitive load. Our reaction to information overload is not to be more selective about the information we take on, but to just forget reading deeply, opting for rough scanning where possible.

4. BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

So what stands in the way of students wanting to learn legal skills? The challenges around this start from the way the students have been taught previously; the transitional learning gap between A-levels and Degree is often a wide one. A transmissive teaching style can seem alien and impenetrable, and the amount of individual responsibility required for your own learning daunting. As a foundation type subject, students can feel it holds them up from the 'real' learning associated with core substantive subjects like criminal or contract law, viewing it as rather a box-ticking module rather than having real worth. Of course some students have such an intense taught course that the learning of these skills is something they need to take individual responsibility for. Our GDL (Graduate Diploma in Law) students are an example of this; they are either in lecture, tutorial or preparing for these in the library...there is no let-up and no time for leisurely classes in legal method.

In response to these challenges, in 2007 I developed a basic wiki in which to house materials to help students with areas like mooting, legal writing, research and revision. My aim was to give support outside of the classroom and to try and inject some element of fun into these sometimes daunting areas. Content was varied; there were lots of written pieces, some put together by students, but also video clips and talking slideshows. The talking slideshows were essentially PowerPoint slides with accompanying audio. The videos were around mooting and were acted out by two students in a slightly spoof-like fashion. Feedback from students was really encouraging and the site attracted a lot of traffic. Three years later however, the limitations of the wiki platform had started to become glaring (amongst these, an inability to create sub-categories meant all items were simply added alphabetically which was unhelpful) and I teamed up with an enthusiastic new lecturer at City, Sanmeet Kaur Dua, to give Learnmore a complete overhaul.

5. WHAT DID LEARNMORE NEED TO BE?

Our first priority was around the image; Learnmore had to be visually exciting. Visual is king for this 18-24 age group, which is where engagement with VLEs often falls flat. Lawbore had always thrived on having an identity separate from City branding and Learnmore had to follow suit. The very 'organised' look to original Learnmore was dictated a little by the wiki functionality and the new version needed to break free of this. Essential features included a wide variety of content to appeal to the different learning styles out there, law is a subject dominated by reading and it was important that Learnmore would combine this with other types of media. Equally vital was the need to give students some ownership of the resource; in the existing version, pieces written by current students were very popular so we needed to stretch this and reach out to more of the City community. Peer learning was key. Learnmore had a role to play as an unthreatening supportive tool to help with those 3am panic moments:

'What's supposed to go in my bundle?'

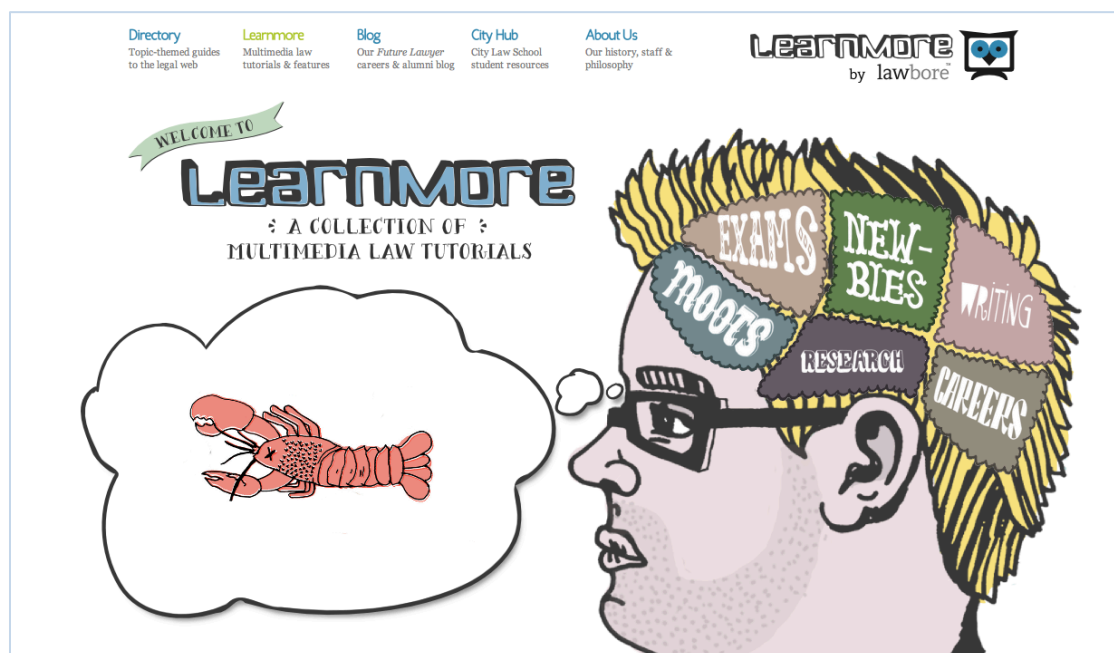
'How can I improve my networking skills?'

'How do I know which law report to use?'

'What happens in a pupillage anyway?'

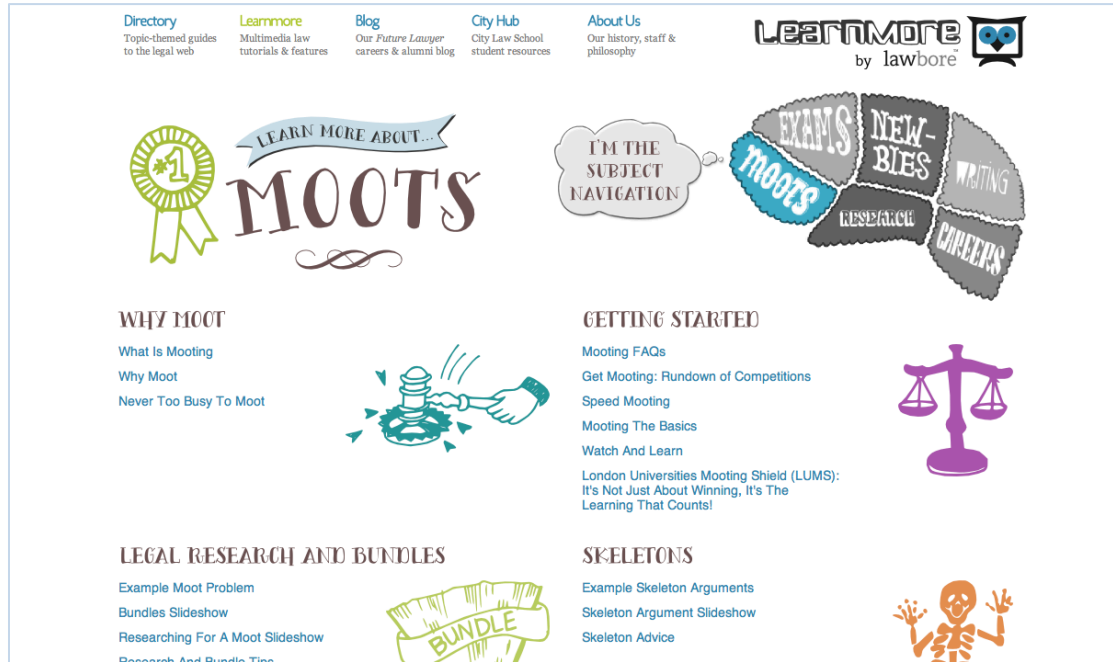
6. THE LEARNMORE 'LOOK'

It was decided that the concept of Learnmore would be focused around a law student's brain, with all of the content housed there. Later quirky developments included thought bubbles with random eclectic thoughts, which change as the user flicks between content.



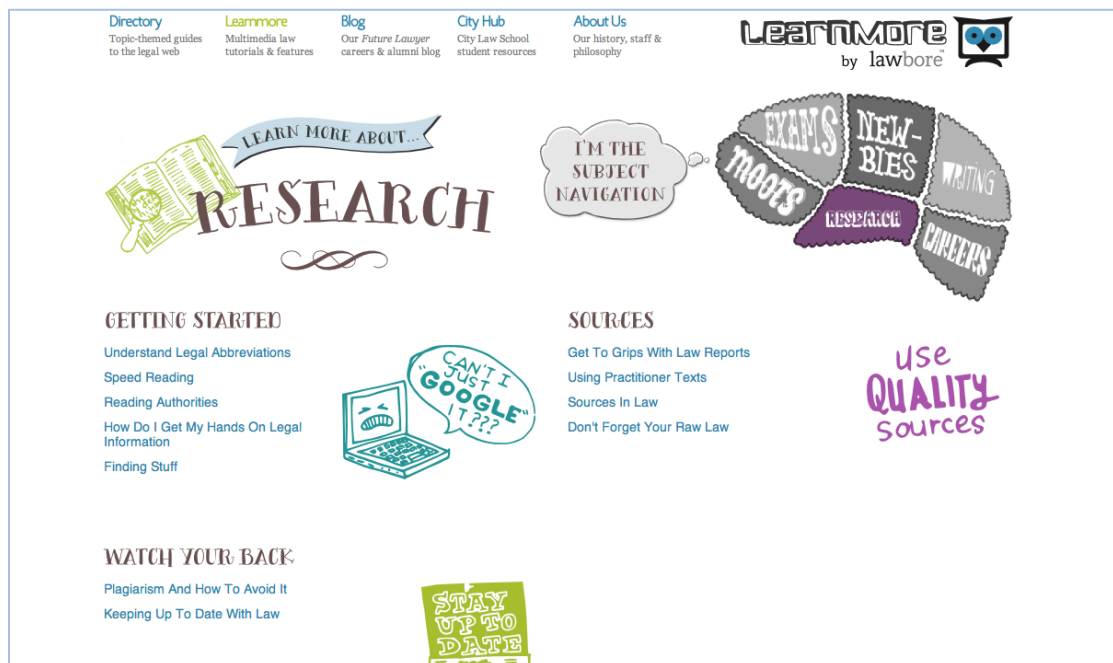
The Learnmore front screen: including random thought bubble

At the next stage we commissioned an extensive selection of images from an illustrator to fit in with each of the six Learnmore areas. In the 2010 version of the site these were gathered together in a cloud on each page, but the 2012 re-design linked these specifically in with the categories.



Learnmore Moots category

The hand-drawn style of the images, specifically designed for Learnmore, lightens the look of the site; making it seem fun but without dumbing down.



Learnmore Research category

7. TYPES OF MEDIA

Student comments around Learnmore are often focused around their appreciation for having materials that they don't have to read from to learn. It was surprising that students are so self-aware about how they learn best.

'Variety of resources is refreshing, not dull and boring like a book'

'Everyone learns by different methods'

'Makes it stick more in my mind...'

'It helps to have lots of different types of resources to learn from, not being reliant on always learning by reading'

'Different resources - online tutorials, slideshows and videos present the information in a fun and stimulating way'

'It gets intense going through textbooks, as reading can become a chore - nice to have something to lighten it'

[Responses to a questionnaire given to first year undergraduate students at City in December 2010]

It seems to work thanks to a mixture of hardcore textual information alongside the visual 'this is how you do it' type material. The talking slideshows are utilised most on the Moots and Research sections, and the emphasis here is on accessibility, bold and interesting imagery and quality audio.

Opponents

Use "My learned friend" or "My learned friend Mr/Miss/Mrs Bloggs".

Modes of address

Emily Allbon
Law Librarian
Bio | Contact

Outline	Thumb	Notes	Search
Slide Title			Duration
Modes of address			00:02
Judges...			00:28
What about when I'm ...			00:17
...and the others?			00:13
...and the rest!			00:12
Your moot partner			00:09
▸ Opponents			00:14
Thank you!			00:02
Image credits			00:02

0 Minutes 19 Seconds Remaining

Slide 7 / 9 | Stopped 00:00 / 00:14

Talking slideshow on Learnmore

The videos appear in the Moots, Newbies and Careers sections currently, although there are plans to extend this. For the Moots section we filmed hours of footage from one of our internal moots and painstakingly edited it to create

a collection of top tips and illustrations of different techniques. In addition we asked some of our students to participate in a roundtable discussion about their mooting experiences and created a series of clips from them.

[tweet this](#)


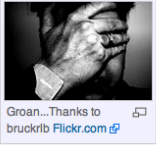
Don't show how you're feeling

P-p-p-poker face.


Remember if you can't hold your poker face, this will almost certainly give your opponent the upper hand.

Remain composed and appear confident even though you think your opponent has clinched the argument.

Do not make faces or sigh when your opponent is speaking or when the judge delivers the judgment.



Make a good impression and dress for the occasion



If you want to come across as confident and persuasive, then you better be organised. Use appropriate language and manner and stand up when saying anything. Your hands should not be in your pockets or fiddling with a pen! Make eye contact with the judge and make sure that you are audible and not speaking too fast.

Mooting is a formal event and you should treat it as such. Arrive early, set out your papers, make sure your watch works and dress formally. Moots are formal events and you may even be asked to don a robe.

Male students should wear a dark suit with an a discrete tie – novelty ties are a no – no! Female students should wear a dark coloured trouser/skirt suit or a dress but ladies note the hemline of your skirt or dress! The chances are that you are already nervous, so don't make your nerves worse by arriving late, getting flustered and looking disorganised. You will create the wrong impression and start from the back

Video footage on Learnmore

There are some real classic clips - my favourite is to be found within the At the Moot - Top Tips section. *Know Your Cases* shows a poor young man citing a case and then not being able to tell the judge anything about it when pressed for further information. Painful!

My favourite quote (from a current Graduate Entry LLB student) concerns the Moots section on Learnmore:

'As far as Learnmore goes, I've probably seen or read almost everything on the site! I feel like when you get to law school you're forced to hit the ground running, often so quickly that you feel like you're completely unprepared for the challenges that get thrown at you. However, Learnmore breaks down the foundations of being a successful law student into bite-sized pieces, albeit pieces with great graphics and cool designs. It helps you teach yourself things you might not think you're capable of doing. I learned how to moot from Learnmore and so when I showed up for my first-ever moot, I knew how to write a skeleton, make a bundle, address the judge and handle questioning. If not for Learnmore, I probably would have shown up armed only with the knowledge of 22 years of watching American legal shows, ready to shout "Objection!" and refer to my opposing counsel as something much less respectful than 'my learned friend' !'

8. LAW PROFESSORS...YAWN...

Anyone working with students will have experience of how much weight they place on the opinion of their peers, sometimes grasping onto a rumour rather than the word of their lecturer. Herndon (2010) describes this phenomenon much better than I: *'Law professors' personal stories about 'how I learned it' - somewhat meaningless and antiquated...Novice peers, are perfect mirrors to help each other reflect and regulate law student learning'*. [5] Lawbore has always placed an importance on the collaboration of both our current students and alumni, and the social networks which we are all a part of demonstrate how much we like a window into the world of others. The questionnaire mentioned previously was given to first year undergraduate students and showed 71% of them liked a mix of advice from their lecturers and other students. Quotes from the same research backed this up:

'I felt inspired by reading about what others in our position had achieved'
'Advice given by students is closer to your heart than that given by your professors'. Learnmore features articles written by students and alumni on a whole array of issues, from *'Twitter for Lawyers'* to *'Networking Effectively'*, *'Doing a mini-Pupillage'* to *'Working in a European Institution'*.


[Directory](#)
Topic-themed guides to the legal web

[Learnmore](#)
Multimedia law tutorials & features


[Blog](#)
Our *Future Lawyer* careers & alumni blog

[City Hub](#)
City Law School student resources

[About Us](#)
Our history, staff & philosophy

LEARNMORE
by lawbore 

Get Yourself Noticed



Network like a bat out of hell. This is often how you will come across the more interesting job roles in between your studies and starting your Pupillage. [tweet this](#)

Solicitors have to attain a certain number of CPD points per year, and they have to attend seminars that are mostly held by chambers. There will be a seminar and a Q and A session followed by drinks and canapés. This is often an excuse for barristers and their solicitors to let their hair down and have a good old time together.

If you find yourself working at a solicitor's office as a paralegal, keep an eye out for the associate's invitations. Again, you can't be a shy, retiring flower about these things. When you see an invite, or hear of a chambers event coming up where your employers are heading, ask to attend. Check with your immediate boss, but then email the chambers' speakers.

I was often thanked for my interest by QCs for asking if I could attend and the fee that is often charged was waived for me. Not only do you get a great lecture on changes in the law and a practitioners point of view, you are in a room full of barristers! This may well be somewhere you want to apply. Ask relevant questions, be yourself and try to enquire about what they want from a pupil.

There may well be a current pupil there for you to find out some inside info that will make your future application stand out. This is an opportunity to make a personal impression that you can pair with your pristine application. You will certainly help yourself get an interview at first round. And maintain contact. Send a thank you letter the following day. If you found that you got on particularly well with someone simply ask them "would I be able to join you at court one day?" This is will keep you known. Of course, there is a fine line between politely asking and being too full on, but a sensible person can usually work that out rather easily.

Chambers' websites do not give much away, and everyone reads them to death before drafting their applications. If you know barristers from a set you are applying to, ask them for a drink or coffee to find out how chambers balances their practice areas; what work a pupil undertakes in second six; does chambers have any niche aspects to their practice? Use contacts to make as tailored an application as possible, and this will also keep you known.

Keeping up appearances will serve you well when trying to find out what kind of employment will benefit you best after studies, and if you have a little black book of email address that you have compiled through networking, then all the better for you! Too many are too reserved. 5,10,30 years ago, these people were in your shoes and needed a bit of help. Don't feel you are a nuisance. You won't lose anything from trying!

Thanks to George Harley for this motivating piece, George completed both his GDL and BPTC at The City Law School.

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Conceived by E Albon. Redesigned with co-conspirator Sanmeet Kaur.
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Alumni Articles on Learnmore

Working In A European Union Institution

Are you frustrated with the whole process of training contracts applications and you don't even find the career in corporate firms appealing? [tweet this](#)

You don't want to be spending your evenings working at the office, but at the same time you want to have financial stability?

Then why don't you give EU jobs a try, just as I did, and get to actually enjoy your career as a lawyer!

Working for the European Union institutions is not just a job; it's a life experience. Since EU employees become the decision-makers of a union of 27 countries, the EU has developed a humanist approach towards its staff, enriching them with professional expertise and cultural stimulation. For me, working for the Legal Service of the Council of the EU, feels like being in a university campus. We are constantly offered a multitude of trainings, ranging from seminars on EU legislation procedure to workshops on specialized legal IT skills. Furthermore, we are entitled to free language courses throughout the year during work hours(!). Plus, we are constantly invited to various social events where you get the chance to meet EU key players, politicians and technocrats from all institutions like the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Court of Justice.

Still not tempted to work for the EU?

What if I add that, the job package includes long holidays and a 9-5 working day, which allows us to balance work with our private lives and take on hobbies or go on exotic trips. When working for the EU, you get to not only have time but also the financial comfort to enjoy your days to the max.

There are all sorts of careers for lawyers in the EU. You could work with lawyer-linguists who ensure the correct legal translation and interpretation of EU legal texts (ie decisions, regulations and even treaties) in all 23 EU languages. If you don't care for spending all day in the office, then you also have the chance to be a field officer where you will be sent to EU member states to ensure that the legislation has been correctly implemented in various policy areas (from fisheries, to environment to consumer health). Lets not forget that you could also be a great barrister by representing the EU at the ECJ in major cases revolving complex national interests.



Think you could join Helena in Brussels?

So how do you get this dream job?

Essentially there are 3 ways. First you can apply for an traineeship (called Stage) where you can taste how it is to work for the EU for a 6 months period. Later, when you realize that you really want to pursue a EU career (from my experience, 99% of stagiaires do), then you need to pass the EU official competition (which comprises of psychometric tests and interview panels). Thirdly, you can also apply for temporary positions by sending your CV either spontaneously or whenever positions become available all around the EU, not just Brussels.

If you want to take a peak at EU institutions from close, then you can join the ELSA UK trips to Brussels. They organise tours to the many EU institutions

Alumni Articles on Learnmore

In the Newbies section we also feature a roundtable discussion with students at the end of the first year of the undergraduate degree: Offering tips and insights into topics as diverse as being an independent learner, preparing for lectures and tutorials and speaking out in tutorials. What is really encouraging is that students do feel real ownership of the resource, and sometimes a certain pride. After the 2012 National Law Student Forum, our student rep wrote a wonderful email:

'I attended the National Law Student Forum in Nottingham Trent University and when the students knew I was representing City University they couldn't stop talking about Lawbore. Words can't describe how happy I was to see students outside our university talk about it and use it. I couldn't but explain to you how thankful I am of you, and all that effort we see you put-in, pays off'.

9. ARE THERE ANY DOWNSIDES?

The main problem is that it has to remain a dynamic resource; I'm constantly on the lookout for new contributors and ideas for articles. There is an inherent danger in creating tailor-made technology-heavy resources: you need to keep it fresh content-wise. Unfortunately whatever you do, it will always leave students wanting more. There is always going to be a debate around how much we provide to students before they stand on their own two feet. I hope that we have struck the balance right and that Lawbore and Learnmore can inspire students to go on to greater things and take responsibility for their learning. This quote, again from a first year student, suggests we are on the right track:

'Learnmore assists, it supports, it advises, it updates, it interacts and communicates information which gives that little bit extra to an aspiring student wanting that 'sparkle' needed to stand out professionally.'

10. WHAT'S NEXT?

Having spent summer 2012 improving the functionality of the site, emphasis for the future is firmly set on extending the content. In addition a Learnmore app for iPad is nearing the end of development thanks to funding from JISC. The initial call from JISC was entitled *Developing mobile library content* (2011) and asked for projects to undertake the development of prototypes for the delivery of scholarly content suitable for delivery to a range of mobile devices. [6] Two additional things were made clear by the call; that they were interested in multimedia resources within any resource and that no new content should be created as part of the project, but existing content should be re-purposed. Hence the app will provide similar content to Learnmore on the web, but with the important addition of interactivity via quizzes and exercises. Although on the surface the content will be comparable, everything about the way resources connect to each other has been reconsidered for this new platform. Low usability is guaranteed to follow where a simple transfer of information from web to mobile device takes place (Jones and Marsden, 2005). [7] Whilst Learnmore has been extremely well received by students, it has always been a frustration that we could not embed any real interaction opportunities within the site. Yes, students can read, listen and watch the materials found within but the 'doing' part of learning is missing. The app gives us a real opportunity to change this.

[1] Emily Allbon is Law Librarian at City University London. She specialises in exploiting technology to improve engagement in legal education. Chosen as BIALL/Wildy Law Librarian of the Year 2012, the Higher Education Academy named her paper at the BILETA Conference 2012 (on which this article is based), as the 'Best Legal Education and Technology paper'.

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[6] JISC (2011), 'JISC Grant Funding 12/11: Digital Infrastructure Portfolio'
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